

Lincoln native would be both pleased and saddened

Luke Lavender was one of the first people to settle in the village of Lancaster, Nebraska. He built a log cabin there in 1864, the same year the village was founded.

At that time, Omaha was the State Capitol and the production of agricultural products was the primary economic role settlers chose to play in Nebraska. The citizens of Lancaster, however, hoped to develop their village into the center of the world's salt industry by exploiting the abundant salt marshes west of the village.

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Now, Lancaster is called Lincoln, and is the seat of the state government. In the late 1860's, when Lavender was building his reputation in Lancaster as a baker and an amateur historian, recording a great deal of western history, the question of moving the capitol from Omaha to Lancaster was a big issue around the state.

Nebraska folk lore buffs say there was an unofficial reason for the state capitol change of locus. Civic and business leaders in Lancaster offered state senators prostitutes and ice cream when they came to find out what qualities the city provided that would make it especially conducive to good government.

You won't find that little tidbit of local history in too many history books. But I bet you a dollar of doughnuts that Luke knew about it.

But that's not what this column is really about. It's about local politics, money, suspense and intrigue, so keep reading.

Today, a record store stands on the corner of 14th and O, where Lavender's log cabin used to be one hundred and twenty some years ago. Some wise people put a historical plaque there when the current building was constructed in 1928. You can look at it and try to imagine what it was like back then, if you want to . . .

History. That's what we're made of. When you begin to forget it, you begin to forget who you are. And you can easily lose site of your original direction too.

At any rate, if Lavender came back today, I think he would be surprised and pleased about how the city has grown and changed. And saddened by the direction the city is currently taking.

I'm talking about downtown redevelopment.

Over the past few years, important city officials and planners have thought that it was about time to destroy a major portion of downtown, at great expense, and construct a new and improved downtown.

Never mind that many of the buildings are structurally sound and merit preservation for their architectural and historical value, as well as that most of them are being occupied by businesses, merchants and residences.

My favorite bar was forced to move from its quaint and historical

location (my dad used to eat chili there when he went to the university in the '50's) to make way for a parking lot the city doesn't really need . . .

Both the restaurant where my dad proposed to my mom as well as the restaurant where I work now are scheduled for demolition for a parking lot and a 10 screen movie theater the city doesn't really need. I used to live in an apartment downtown that will be torn down to make way for a mall leading from the Lied Center to the Nebraska Bookstore.

But the current downtown redevelopment plan is not just an inconvenience. It's a mistake. A big one.

I believe that the city officials who dreamed up this grandiose plan have their constituents best interests in mind. They want a robust downtown that residents would be proud of and visitors would be attracted to.

After all, it's good for the economy.

And I realize that the downtown area wasn't keeping up economically with all of the retail and business areas that were developed in other parts of the city over the past 10 to 15 years.

But the point that city officials have failed to see, and it is a crucial one, is that it is not the physical environment (buildings, parking, etc.) that hurt downtown economically. The business environment of the area (cost of rent, competition from the plethora of shopping malls built in the suburbs, etc.) is the real problem.

The most recent problem with the business environment downtown is the uncertainty of the future of structures currently intact. Who wants to start a business, move a business, or remain in business downtown when you can't predict what the future really holds for you and your downtown business?

Business people make decisions and take risks by evaluating what the future consequences of their business behavior would be. Essentially, if they can be assured a high probability of growth, they may take a chance, if not they won't. It's as easy as that.

And the city of Lincoln hasn't given businesses downtown very reliable odds. Many businesses have left or are in the process of leaving their current locations downtown to locations that offer more security for their investment.

The redevelopment plan has hurt more than it has helped. It may have even killed downtown. If it weren't for the university's close proximity, I believe many more businesses would have left the downtown area like rats jumping off a sinking ship.

Three years after politicians started talking about downtown redevelopment, and about a dozen proposed plans later, the redevelopment project is currently a partially completed abstract concept that still raises more questions than it answers.

About all that has really been accomplished is that some buildings have been torn down. And many

businesses have been forced to move, many away from downtown.

That's a hell of a way to run a railroad.

I was in Boulder, Colo. last November. The town has an attractive

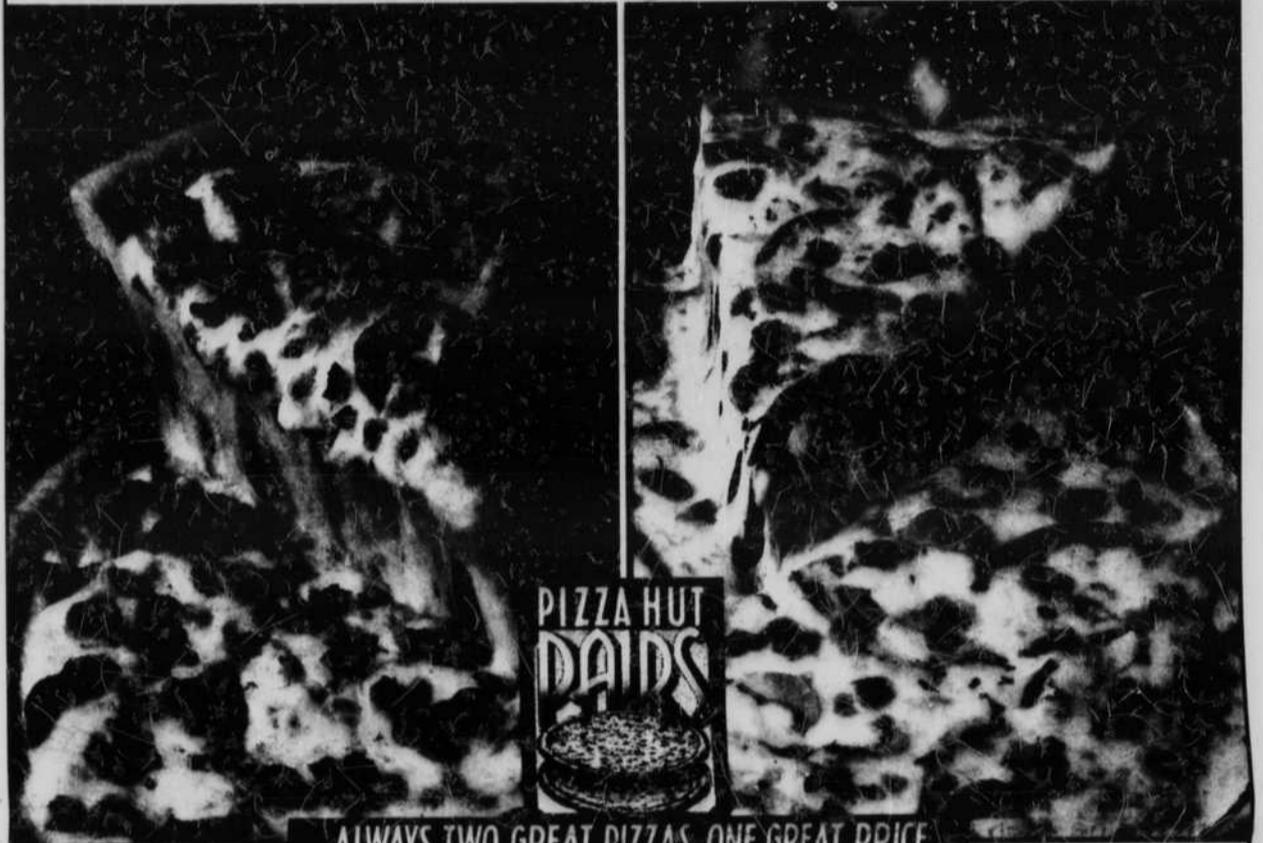
and vital downtown area full of retail space and restaurants. The area was a throbbing hub of activity where people spent money at almost all times.

Their civic and business leaders

made an intelligent decision when they decided to renovate existing structures instead of demolishing them to build new ones. It was a

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