

Save your pennies; meter fees may increase

■ The proposal would raise parking meter fees 15 to 20 percent as a way to generate more revenue for downtown redevelopment.

BY ERIC RINEER
Staff writer

A recent proposal by the Downtown Lincoln Association may leave people needing a bit more change for city parking meters next year.

Last week the DLA proposed that the city collect more coins from its meters in order to generate enough revenue for future parking projects, DLA President Polly McMullen said.

McMullen said the DLA asked

Mayor Dale Young to include the proposal in next year's city budget. If agreed upon by next year's mayor and city council, the fee hike could take place as early as spring 2000.

Tad McDowell, University Parking Manager, said the fee hike would not apply to campus meters.

By raising city meter prices by 10 or 15 cents per hour, McMullen said, the city could create a bond fund of about \$600,000 within one year.

In 1985, a \$12 million bond fund was approved by Lincoln voters for downtown redevelopment. Since 1992 the city has financed more than 2,000 metered and garage parking spaces downtown.

Money is currently being spent on two downtown parking projects: the expansion of the Que Place Garage at 12th and Q streets and the building of a new garage behind the Lincoln

Journal Star offices at 10th and Q streets.

Both projects were commitments that secured the building of the Embassy Suites Hotel at 11th and P streets.

McMullen said the current parking projects were "a catalyst to help move downtown forward."

She said the new bond fund proposal by the DLA could help with the shortage of parking in other significant downtown areas, such as the Haymarket area.

"They really need attention very, very quickly," McMullen said.

McMullen said the city was in the midst of designing projects that could benefit University of Nebraska-Lincoln students, but would require additional city parking.

McMullen said a mega-plex movie theater may be introduced in

the near future. The theater, which would be built by Douglas Theatre Co., would include at least 16 screens.

"If we're going to continue downtown to be successful, we have to be able to assure there is adequate parking," McMullen said.

Roger Larson, DLA board member, said he was optimistic the proposal would succeed because there was no tax increase involved.

"I feel it's very positive," he said. "These parking needs would be met by users and not assessed to general taxpayers of the community."

Larson said additional parking garages could also attract new business development to the downtown area. More parking also would benefit downtown businesses wishing to expand, he said.

City Council Chairman Curt Donaldson agreed.

"It makes a certain amount of sense," he said. "The lack of parking is holding up redevelopment downtown."

Donaldson said he felt higher meter rates would be a small price to pay.

"Our parking rates are lower than a lot of comparable cities," he said.

Linda Hershberger, city parking manager, said a recent survey of on-street parking meter prices showed that Lincoln had one of the lowest rates among regional cities.

In Omaha and Iowa City, Iowa, for example, meter rates are 50 cents per hour. Des Moines, Iowa, meters are 40 cents per hour and in Boulder, Colo., meters are 75 cents per hour.

Lincoln's city meters, with a rate of 25 cents per hour, collected about \$760,000 in change last year, Hershberger said.

Bills to tackle small farmers' pig problems

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ity of our product, not based on the quantity that we provide," he said.

ConAgra's Gady said packers have to employ more buyers to work with lots of small farmers. He said ConAgra deals with 8,000 hog producers nationally and suggested farmers look at pooling together to offer more animals.

But Dierks said he is concerned about packers being unfair to small farmers.

"We just want the smaller producer to play with the same rules everybody else is," he said. "Small family farms made this nation great."

Craig Hegemann, a senior agronomy major at UNL, has seen smaller farms disappear around his family's own operation. Three of Hegemann's uncles and his father raise pigs together near Howells, northeast of Columbus. Hegemann said his grandfather started raising hogs more than 50 years ago.

Today, neighbors are leaving the business, he said. Some of the farms that closed were smaller than his family's, he said; other farmers were older and had lost the will to fight. "They were

tired of dealing with what is going on," he said. "I know they just closed the door and walked away."

That trend fits national statistics. The U.S. Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service reports that the number of hog operations in the United States has decreased from nearly 700,000 in 1980 to about 114,000 in 1998.

Dierks worried that if low prices continue, more small farms will close.

"People are in a world of hurt," he said.

The NASS reported a dip in hog prices from 42 cents per pound in May and June to less than 15 cents per pound in December.

Hegemann said his family's operation usually has about 500 sows. Because of low prices, they have about half that number now, he said.

"We're pretty stable," he said. "But it gets pretty tough when you get up in the morning and realize you're losing money instead of making it."

He said he would eventually like to return to the farm full-time. But right now that's economically impossible. Only one of his uncles works the farm

full-time, he said.

Gady sees the price problem as one part of a capitalism vs. corporatism debate. As both packers and producers grow in size, smaller farmers have a harder time surviving in the market. Entering it becomes even more difficult, he said.

"Why can't young people have an opportunity to get into that business?" he asked. Another question he asked focuses on packing companies, some of which he said raised livestock and sold the meat in their own restaurants.

"How big do you let them get?"

But ConAgra's Gady said the company suffered losses, too. ConAgra's stock dropped from a high of \$38 in late 1997 to about \$23 in mid-1998, he said. It has since gone up to \$31.75, he said. Meat production in fiscal year 1998 jumped in the fourth quarter, he said. It took low prices for the market to absorb huge quantities of meat, he said.

The proposals Dierks' bills offer don't address the real issues of oversupply and a need to expand foreign markets, he said.

Al Wellman, University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension livestock marketing specialist, said a number of factors could have contributed to December's low prices. Large domestic meat supplies, weak international markets, questionable demand, the value of the dollar, low grain prices and the 1996 Freedom to Farm Act all probably played a role, he said.

The combined effect makes finding a solution difficult, he said.

"I'm not sure we can pass something and fix it," he said. "If you tweak something, you can send a bunch of ripples that you didn't expect to send."

Although he is in favor of "leveling the playing field," he said he would like to see the market fix the problem.

"That's been our dream all along — to get the government out of agriculture," he said.

The Freedom to Farm Act was intended to do that. It was supposed to wean farmers off government payments.

"About two years later, we're all gasping for air and wondering if that was a good idea," he said.

Gady agreed with letting the market fix the problem, although he called it "the most obvious and probably the hardest" solution.

"Cycles are not unusual in the hog business," he said. "This one was just more severe than the typical hog cycle."

"Our guess is that a year from now, hog prices will be favorable to the producer."

Hegemann shared some of his optimism.

"You've got to kind of just be strong and ride through it," he said.

Dierks said the legislation is based on similar bills in Congress. On the state level, he has worked with state representatives from Minnesota, Iowa and South Dakota.

James Nygren, the Agriculture Committee's legal counsel, said the state had to work with other states because packers would find their supply elsewhere if only Nebraska passes the laws.

Whatever effect the proposed legislation might have, Hegemann said he knows finding an answer to the complex economic questions affecting his future will be hard.

"Nobody knows how to fix things," he said.

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