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DOWNTOWN LINCOLN ASSOCIATION RELEASES RETAIL RETENTION AND RECRUITMENT STRATEGY

A Retail Retention and Recruitment Strategy commissioned by the Downtown Lincoln Association (DLA), City of Lincoln, Lincoln Chamber of Commerce and private developers encourages downtown to "create a critical mass of local independent retail that collectively creates a vibrant destination." If successful, this strategy will "begin to create the visible fundamentals and 'buzz' required to attract national brand name stores."

To implement this strategy, Denver-based retail consultants Mary Beth Jenkins of the Laramie Company and Brad Segal of Progressive Urban Management Associates (PUMA) recommend eight key actions:

1. Support what works, including strengthening existing restaurant and apparel segments.
2. Identify retail nodes, strengthen and connect them, focusing on efforts to concentrate retail in the Haymarket district, P and O Streets.
3. Implement the 2004 parking study to address the number one consumer issue that is currently damaging downtown retail.
4. Create a retail support program within DLA to help in the attraction and incubation of local independent businesses and other quality retail.
5. Strengthen connections to the University of Nebraska, both programmatic and physical, to create innovative new businesses and deepen market penetration within the campus community.
6. Develop and distribute marketing materials that differentiate Lincoln from Omaha and capitalize on the untapped potential from downtown's existing in-place markets.
7. Implement City policies to assist downtown retail including flexible sign codes, streamlined development review processes and continued utilization of tax increment financing and other financial incentives.

8. Support civic investments and new residential development, including the Vision 2015 Pillars, to strengthen the market fundamentals for downtown to support retail.

Segal noted that Downtown Lincoln's assets include an excellent stock of historic buildings which give it "a great sense of place", proximity to UNL, the Grand, Ross and State Theatres, a strong real estate development community and a strong base of successful local restaurants and retailers. Weaknesses include lack of a retail anchor, limited national retailers and restaurants, restrictive signage regulations and widespread negative perceptions on parking.

Opportunities include establishing stronger programmatic ties between downtown and UNL to encourage and incubate new retail concepts, downtown's authenticity and walkability which differentiates it from shopping malls and the strong civic partnership which exists between DLA, the Chamber, city government and UNL.

Segal and Jenkins also provided a "hit list" of what they consider to be immediate opportunities for new downtown retail. "Based on our knowledge of comparable college town markets (i.e. Boulder, Fort Collins, Lawrence and Iowa City) we see a number of national/regional destination tenants who are a good fit for Lincoln," noted Jenkins. Prospective tenants include full service restaurants such as P.F. Chang's, China Bistro, Kc9 Steakhouse and Rock Bottom Brewery and apparel and accessories shops such as Bath and Body, American Eagle, The Limited and Forever 21.

Mayor Beutler noted that "when Lincoln residents and visitors head downtown, they are looking for unique, creative and colorful destinations. These distinctive retail and entertainment areas add to the appeal of downtown and give our city an identity. I am pleased that the study recommendations include that type of development. The strategy builds on the strength of our downtown, including the important connections with UNL. It dovetails with other community planning efforts and supports city initiatives to make Lincoln more friendly to businesses of all types."

Tonn Ostergard representing 2015 Vision, said many of the consultant's recommendations make great sense in helping revitalize Lincoln's downtown. "A vibrant downtown is critical to Lincoln's continued success and we are very encouraged with the potential opportunities outlined in the consultant's study" Ostergard said. "2015 Vision is committed to working with the Mayor and DLA promoting new retail growth and encouraging people to come downtown and enjoy great shopping, dining and entertainment opportunities."

DLA President Polly McMullen noted that work has already begun on the recommendations in the report, including discussions with UNL on a possible retail incubation program and work with the Beutler administration on signage and parking issues. "Implementation of the retail strategy is a very high priority for DLA. With major projects such as the Synergy Project and West Haymarket Arena on the horizon, the time is right to focus on downtown retail."