May 2026 League of Women Voters Lincoln Lancaster County Observer Corps Report

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Justice Council 5/1/26

Were there any items of concern in terms of open meetings and good government?
No

What were the main items of discussion at this meeting?

The reports provided at the meeting indicated little change in the number of people participating in diversion programs and being housed in the jail. We can get those reports from the county clerk, whose staff is secretary for the group.

One exception was the continued growth in people awaiting a bed at the Regional Center and the number of days they had to wait at the both the jail and the Crisis Center. There is a second 16-bed voluntary crisis center (Crisis Stabilization Center) which fully opened last July and currently had only one open bed.

The time people housed in the jail awaiting competency hearings has increased from 26 days to 94 days in one year, for example

Region V Systems is hosting a summit on this issue June 30-July 1 at Innovation Campus.

There has also been growth in the number of days people with felony drug charges are spending in jail awaiting a trial or transfer to the penitentiary.

The Justice Council created a committee to investigate this issue, disposition times in Class IV Felony drug related cases, with a report due before the next meeting in August. Just 6 offices will send a representative to the committee in order to avoid triggering open meeting requirements. Six is less than a quorum.

This issue was identified as a driver of jail population in the 2025 Criminal Justice System and Jail Assessment. The committee could assess barriers and recommend improvements such as rapid triage, earlier defense/prosecution communication, streamlined court scheduling, and integrated Community Corrections/Adult Drug Court involvement.

Observed by Nancy Rose

Lincoln City Council 5/4/26

Were there any items of concern in terms of open meetings and good government?
No. Tom Beckius absent

What were the main items of discussion at this meeting?

The meeting was almost 3.5 hours long. There was a noncontroversial approval of an amendment to Lincoln Municipal Code clarifying that minimum lot sizes for two-family homes would apply to converted dwellings as well as new-built. There was discussion of an appeal of a

planning commission approval of a special permit for a community unit plan that hinged on a disagreement over maintenance expenses of a private road.

But the biggest discussion item was Councilman Bowers' minimum wage ordinance, which would restore for Lincoln residents and businesses elements of the voter-approved state initiative on minimum wage, which had been altered by a legislative bill to create a lower minimum wage for 14 and 15 year olds, create a lower 90-day training wage for people 20 and younger, and convert the cost of living increase to a 1.7% cap.

36 people spoke at the meeting: 34 in favor, 2 against.

Those speaking against were: a representative from Christ Lincoln Schools who was concerned that the minimum wage increase would drive the cost of child care to even more unaffordable heights, and a representative from the Lincoln Independent Business Association, who said that at least 10 businesses had approached him to oppose the ordinance. The concerns cited included the unintended consequence of loss of jobs as business owners adjusted to not only the higher minimum wage, but the "ladder effect" of needing to raise other employee's wages to maintain their pay equity. Some businesses could investigate automation in lieu of staffing and may need to increase prices. It was noted that the youth minimum wage is time-limited, with people graduating to the full minimum wage at the age of 16 or after 90 days of training.

Organizational representatives speaking in favor included: League of Women Voters Lincoln-Lancaster County, Voices for Children in Nebraska, Nebraska Appleseed, New Voices in Omaha, ACLU of Nebraska, Mental Health Association of Nebraska, and Bridges to Hope. Several young people involved in the Lincoln-Lancaster County Youth Advisory Council spoke. Parents or grandparents spoke on behalf of their teen children or grandchildren. A couple union members spoke. State Senator Danielle Conrad spoke on the council's legal ability to pass the ordinance, the recent shift in the Unicameral's increasing intervention in voter initiatives, and the City of Lincoln's preexisting take on minimum wage with its Living Wage Ordinance, which affects city workers and contracts and sets a base wage of least 110% of the federal poverty guideline for a family of four.

Common topics of comment included anger and frustration at the state legislature for having changed the voter initiative in a substantive way, respecting the "will of the people," the precarious position of people trying to eke out a living amidst rising prices when incomes are not keeping pace, the unfairness of a different wage for young people doing the same job, and the many young people who aren't "just earning pocket money" but who may be supporting basic family needs (especially in cases where the parents may be single parents, or drugs or incarceration have affected the family), saving for their education, or who may even be emancipated minors needing to support themselves.

One person spoke on behalf of low-income veterans, noting that Social Security and other federal benefits have COLA increases, and that not allowing COLA increase for minimum wage can deepen poverty. There was discussion about economics, that businesses that were already struggling might be the ones to be pushed over the edge by a minimum wage increase, but wages aren't the only issue, with energy and general goods costs also rising. Mental Health Association of Nebraska framed a COLA-based increase in the minimum wage as a suicide prevention tool, noting that economic distress is a driver of suicide, especially among already-vulnerable populations like people reentering society from incarceration. Bridges to Hope also

mentioned the impact on insufficiently-increasing minimum wages on recidivism and the stability required for formerly incarcerated people to be successful. A couple of the nonprofit organizations who spoke mentioned that the increased minimum wage would be scary for their organizations, which typically rely on grants and donations to operate, but that the increase would both benefit their clients and help contribute to staff satisfaction and stability. A couple of proponents noted that they were former business owners and would support the increase because of the value they had put in their employees.

Comparisons to other states included a note that 34 other states and DC have a differential minimum wage for younger workers, and a discussion of a case study in Springfield, Illinois, where the increased spending power of higher wages may have contributed to a boosted economy, but the applicability of a comparison between Nebraska and Illinois was questioned.

Councilmen Brody Weber and James Michael Bowers posed questions to a couple of speakers.

Any general comments about the meeting?

The council members are in a difficult position, needing to balance the needs and desires of citizens and business owners with the social ills of poverty and the need for economic development. A couple of the people commenting in support of the ordinance exhibited hostility towards those speaking in opposition.

Observed by Katie Bradshaw

Lancaster County Board of Commissioners 5/5/26
No report

Staff Meeting, Lancaster County Board of Commissioners 5/7/26

Were there any items of concern in terms of open meetings and good government?
No. Christa Yoakum was absent but Chelsea Johson ran the meeting - no concerns.

What were the main items of discussion at this meeting?

Quarterly Veterans Services Officer report - highlights were that VA is processing claims much faster, seeing more people ask for Veteran's aid from the state, but not at the County level..

Budget hearings began - County Court, Adult Probation and Administrative Services presented their proposed budgets. Other departments will be presenting over the next few meetings.

The only action item was granting approval to submit an application for the Expanding Youth Access to Community Based Treatment Grant Program in the amount of $600,000. If approved it would provide funding for a Behavioral Health Therapist for the Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention.

Observed by Jean McGuire

Lincoln City Council 5/11/26

Were there any items of concern in terms of open meetings and good government?

No

What were the main items of discussion at this meeting?

There was a short meeting of the Board of Equalization and Justin Carlson was elected Chair.

There were maintenance business improvement districts approved for College View, Havelock street, North 27th, from O street north to Fair Street, University Place and West O street. There was no public testimony on this.

There was a resolution for an application of annexation of 30 acres of property located at So. 98th and Van Dorn but this sounds like this was a planned development and there was no public testimony about this. No mention of any sewer upgrades.

The big event was that the Council approved amending the Municipal Code to create a new "Lincoln Minimum Wage Ordinance". This passed 6 to 1. Tom Duden was the no vote. His concern was about entry level jobs being lost. He said he also felt that the citizens may not have understood the implications of their votes. Brody Weber stated that the advisory opinion of the Attorney General is not binding, that it is "only an opinion". He went further to state that "the vote of the people is not advisory." Sondra Washington brought up her memories of working for passage of the ERA and felt this was a similar advocacy issue. There was some discussion among Council Members about who would pay for a lawsuit should the AG decide to bring a suit against the City. No ideas on this yet but Brody Weber stated the cost was worth honoring the voters' will.

Observed by Julia Metcalf

Lancaster County Board of Commissioners 5/12/26

No report

Lincoln Board of Education 5/12/26

Were there any items of concern in terms of open meetings and good government?

Yes. Overall, Board members do not discuss policy or practices at their public meetings, at least not during the three meetings I have attended. Typically, their conversation is limited to complementing a staff member for an award or on a report. The Board agendas also appear to be much less comprehensive than one would expect of a district of this size.

What were the main items of discussion at this meeting?

Little discussion; agenda items approved, as I recall, unanimously.

Observed by Betty Ann VanDeventer

Lincoln/Lancaster County Planning Commission 5/13/26
No meeting

Staff Meeting, Lancaster County Board of Commissioners 5/14/26
Were there any items of concern in terms of open meetings and good government?
No

What were the main items of discussion at this meeting?

Semi-Annual Aging Partners Update – Randy Jones, Director. Rural transit program participation remains steady. Digital literary classes were held which are another way to provide independence to seniors, Asking county for $44,000 next fiscal year to make up for federal and state cuts.

Region 5 Update – Patrick Kriefels , Regional Administrator. Nebraska's public behavioral health system that supports wellness and recovery for mental illness and substance abuse. Lancaster County has 67% of the population (with 11.8 poverty rate in 2025) of the 16 counties that make up Region 5. Region 5 makes up 25% of the state's population. Patrick noted the return on investment – for every $1 spent on treatment and recovery programs there is a future anticipated savings of $3. County match request for next fiscal year remains the same as current fiscal year (refer to meeting packet for more detail). Christa Yoakum is the Regional Governing Board Chair.

Apace update – Matt Kasik, Director. Largest provider for people with disabilities. Does not utilize county funding, all Medicaid based with rates set by state but relies on support of county from a non-monetary basis. Christa Yoakum is on governing board and brought up state's new assessment tool for people with disabilities and the issues have been having – cases where people are being dropped two tiers and not getting the support they need and also have cases where people are being elevated to higher tier and getting too much support and losing their independence. Matt stated it is creating an unfortunate situation.

National Association of County Officials (NACO) - Jon Cannon, Executive Director NACO has lobbied for numerous bills in the legislature that support county government and has data that counties can access.

After break for private executive session, budget hearings were held for:

Community Corrections - Jeff Kirpatrick, Director. Refer to meeting packet for proposed budget details. Pretrial Services Agency accreditation may happen next fiscal year (26/27) and will require additional funds. Will have a new contractor for housing that will be a better facility and more beds (going from 12 to 29 beds).

County Engineer – Pam Dingman. Pam noted concern over possible pause of federal gas tax and the loss of funds from that as well as fuel prices. Challenges – inflation, supply chain, contractor labor shortages and vehicles/equipment out of service. Pam reviewed current and future projects for bridges, culverts, gravel roads and re-pavement, as well as federal aid

payout and projects, equipment, cash reserve, and fund transfers. FYI – the county has 289 bridges.

After budget hearings, the board voted unanimously to authorize Commissioner Vest to sign the Communication Operability for Emergency Response Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) letter that is addressed to Governor Pillen.

Any general comments about the meeting?

Impact of federal cuts/program changes to our local government was apparent for several of agencies and departments that presented today

Observed by Diane Freese

Lincoln Electric System 5/15/26

Were there any items of concern in terms of open meetings and good government?
No

What were the main items of discussion at this meeting?

Board adopted the LES resolution to expand Net Metering (10 mega watts); 2 Lincoln residents discussed the continued need for LES to consider expanding solar/storage due to increasing customer costs and global warming.

Observed by Alyx Knight

Lincoln City Council 5/18/26

Were there any items of concern in terms of open meetings and good government?
No

What were the main items of discussion at this meeting?
No main points of discussion; business meeting that lasted only 23 minutes

Any general comments about the meeting?
5:30 pm Monday meeting, not 3 pm Monday meeting

Observed by Judy Kelly

Lancaster County Board of Commissioners 5/19/26
No report

Staff Meeting, Lancaster County Board of Commissioners 5/21/26

Were there any items of concern in terms of open meetings and good government?
No

What were the main items of discussion at this meeting?

All five commissioners were present. They went into exec session as they generally do during the meeting to discuss lawsuits and other issues that are allowed by law. They were presented budget proposals from the county clerk, weed control, records management and risk management.

Observed by Nancy Rose

Lincoln City Council 5/25/26
Memorial Day

Lancaster County Board of Commissioners 5/26/26
No report

Lincoln Board of Education 5/26/26
No report

Lincoln/Lancaster County Planning Commission 5/27/26

Were there any items of concern in terms of open meetings and good government?
No. Two commissioners were absent, Dick, Campbell and Brett Ebert.

What were the main items of discussion at this meeting?

Commissioners approved a change of zone and a special permit for a plan to create “affordable” housing at 36th St. and Prescott Avenue, the home of Azalealand, a defunct local nursery. The plan, by Neighborworks, is to create 18 affordable homes, row houses and duplexes, and split off two lots for single family homes. The affordable homes would face inward with a large mutual front yard. That yard would also serve as a drainage area…detention pond…for large rainstorms. Underground drainage was too expensive according to Neighborworks staff.

The commission also gave approval to create a first local landmark, thematic district for former corner stores in multiple locations across Lincoln. Most of the 14 corner stores had originally been small locally owned grocery stores in residential areas. The landmark designation would allow more flexible use through historic preservation special permits or bring in financing help through historic tax credits for qualifying work.

Commissioners also provided for a change of zone for a corner store located at 17th and Harwood Street so the owner, Speedway motors, could use it as a store rather than just an Office or residence. Commissioners debated and rejected by a 5 to 2 vote, a motion to prohibit selling vaping related equipment at that location. Commissioners in favor of the prohibition were responding to neighbor concerns. Other commissioners pointed out that the commission should not be regulating people's morals through the rules.

The planning commission also gave 7 to 0 approval to several non-controversial special permits,… for a residential healthcare facility at 70th and Pine Lake Road, for an accessory dwelling unit at SW. 140th St. and W. Spring Rd., and for a new golf course, Battle Run golf course at 112th St. and A St.

They also approved a change of zone from Highway commercial to residential for a planned apartment complex between N. 22nd St. and N. 23rd St. in between Y and W. A few neighbors complained about the large number of apartments in a single-family neighborhood (84 units, 105 bedrooms) and about assured future parking problems. The developer's attorney Kent Seacrest pointed out that the developer was providing 25% more parking space than absolutely required. The neighbors noted that the requirement, one space per apartment, was unrealistic since most renters would be students, each with a car. The 1.2 cars per apartment in the plans is " based on wishful thinking." They also pointed out that the developer had not met with residents during the planning stages for the apartment complex.

Observed by Nancy Rose

Staff Meeting, Lancaster County Board of Commissioners 5/28/26
No report