

HED: The future of food trucks in Lincoln

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After catering Tammy Ward's Lincoln City Council campaign event in 2019, owner of [Muchachos](#) restaurant and food truck, Nick Maestas, approached her about helping grow the opportunities for food truck vendors in Lincoln.

This conversation helped trigger the creation of the [Food Truck Pilot Program](#) that allows food trucks to have prime spaces in downtown Lincoln and better parking access in residential neighborhoods.

"I really loved the idea of the food truck pilot program where they can find places to park downtown that will help grow the industry, because that's what I love the most in the industry as a whole," Maestas said.

While the program came to a halt during the COVID-19 lockdown, the program restarted and will be concluded at the end of the year. Now, members of the Lincoln community are ready to see permanent changes for the good of the food truck community within the next year.

The effect of the Food Truck Pilot Program

In 2021 when Donna and Tom Upton started considering getting a food truck, they reached out to farmers markets across Lincoln asking if they would be a good fit. In April 2022, [The Long 'N Grinding Road](#) opened to the public.

In addition to working the farmers markets, the Upton's would reach out to other businesses through Facebook and Instagram in hopes of getting a spot to park because there were not opportunities for optimal parking spaces for the truck before the program was started.

"We have to be either invited or you have to have permission," Upton said. "You can't just pull up somewhere and start selling."

Before the pilot program, food trucks were only able to park on the street with a special permit that required a four week notice and the street had to be closed.

For somebody as established as Maestas, who has owned his food truck for around five years, he understands the importance of this program for new and upcoming food truck vendors.

"We're kind of lucky enough at this point to where we've been around a while, and we essentially really don't do a ton of public stuff anymore. We're really mostly only doing private events," Maestas said.

Where the Food Truck Pilot Program is headed

According to Ward, the process of creating the program involved gathering a large group of Lincoln locals in government and in the food truck industry to be involved in the decision to make the program a reality.

Ward said those selected to brainstorm ideas for the project and herself sat around a table and thought about what needed to be done in order to have spaces downtown for food trucks, and that is how the creation of the Food Truck Pilot Program came to be.

“We met with the city of Lincoln's Urban Development Department staff, we met with the city attorney's office, and I had this big meeting of all the people that should be involved,” Ward said.

Ward said that the program allowed for better parking spaces for food trucks near the Nebraska State Office Building, the Nebraska State Capitol and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Along with better spaces near large public buildings, the program allows for extended periods of parking in neighborhoods.

When the program started, six food trucks applied to be a part of the program, according to Salem.

The goal of the program was to continue to invigorate the downtown area and create vitality on the sidewalk and add to overall interest, according to Salem.

“We want people to feel like there is more to downtown than just this one stop that they wanted to make either a movie or a restaurant. We want people to see multiple opportunities and multiple reasons to venture out,” Salem said.

The City of Lincoln [website](#) says that depending on how successful the program is there will be permanent changes made to the Vendor Truck Ordinance allowing vendors more opportunities to park downtown and in other commercially-zoned areas.

The commercially-zoned locations mentioned on the City of Lincoln's website include Centennial Mall and Q Street, 8 Street between M and L streets and Centennial Mall and M Street.

An ordinance that Ward would like to see put in place would be the extension of time a food truck is allowed to be parked. The city's food truck [ordinance](#) says food trucks are only allowed to stay parked in a spot for 10 minutes. However, the program changed this law by allowing a food truck to be parked for three hours, according to Ward.

Hallie Salem, the redevelopment manager for Lincoln's Urban Development said that fully defined changes to the ordinance have not been made yet but that they will continue to piggyback on the existing general guidelines such as allowing for continued designation of metered areas for food trucks.

To create ordinances that are effective for food truck vendors and local businesses in Lincoln, Ward said that the City Council will review the analytics of the program to see what kind of permanent changes can be made.

“The urban development department, parking departments, law department and I will sit down and gather up that data and see how it worked, even in the cold weather, right?” Ward said. “And (we’ll) just see how those spots worked out and we’ll collect that data and make some recommendations with the vendors.”

Along with working with the Mayor’s office, Lincoln Urban Development and Lincoln City Council, food truck vendors will play an important role when coming up with recommendations for amended ordinances, Ward said.

“I feel like this has been a very collaborative effort,” Salem said. “This has been a much more supported effort than we originally saw when we first started talking about this, and I’m very certain that we’ll be able to get across the finish line with this.”

Working with local restaurants

A big part of the project, though, doesn’t solely involve food trucks but also local restaurants.

When the project was initially proposed, Salem said that there was a lot of pushback from brick and mortar restaurants in Lincoln. Salem said that some felt that the food trucks would encroach on their ability and create an unfair advantage because food trucks wouldn’t be paying property taxes.

“We’ve seen kind of a turnaround in that the sum now are actually seeing the benefits of a concentrated choice for outdoor dining and in dining in general,” Salem said.

Salem pointed out that there is an overlap of brick and mortar restaurants that own food trucks in Lincoln, and that helps ease the concern of more food truck parking availability in downtown locations.

“We’re working in conjunction with the rest of existing restaurants. We don’t want to compete with them. We want to work with them,” Ward said as an advocate for more food truck parking opportunities in the downtown area.

Ward said there are laws put in place to make it so that food truck vendors and local restaurant owners aren’t competing, such as making it so that a food truck cannot park closer than 200 feet to an existing restaurant.

“I totally support it,” Nader Sepahpur, owner of the downtown Lincoln pizzeria Yia Yia’s, said. “I just hope that there is an understanding that the food trucks don’t maybe compete on the same

level as brick and mortar restaurants or on the products that sell, otherwise I encourage it and I'm all for it.”



Photo of Muchachos restaurant, owned by Nick Maestas



Photo of Centennial Mall where food trucks can park for business

Sources:

Tammy Ward - <https://otter.ai/u/KITC08jTdTzQli6jyzAwZrAi6xY>

Food truck farmer's market - https://otter.ai/u/i9O7avqAcPh42c0_Ug5L-LTgkW4
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Nick Maestas - https://otter.ai/u/l40HdEq9_WS-xoJuOmwFwAifYU?f=%2Fmy-notes
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<https://www.lincoln.ne.gov/City/Departments/Urban-Development/Park-and-Go/Food-Truck-Pilot-Program>

Tweet: The @citycouncil food truck #pilot program is wrapping up, but what ordinances can be put in place to help food trucks? Read here to find out.