

MEETING RECORD

Advanced public notice of the Urban Design Committee meeting was posted on the County-City bulletin board and the Planning Department's website.

NAME OF GROUP: URBAN DESIGN COMMITTEE

DATE, TIME AND PLACE OF MEETING: Tuesday, March 3, 2026 3:00 p.m., County-City Building, City Council Chambers, 555 S. 10th Street, Lincoln, NE.

MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE: Jill Grasso, Tom Huston, Michelle Penn and Gill Peace. Emily Deeker, Mark Canney and Michael Harpster absent

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE: Arvind Gopalakrishnan, Paul Barnes, Collin Christopher, David Cary, and Clara McCully of the Planning and Development Services Department; Hallie Salem of the Urban Development Department; and other interested parties

Chair Penn called the meeting to order and acknowledged the posting of the Open Meetings Act in the room.

Penn said the Urban Design Committee action today is final action on all items on the agenda

Penn then called for the approval of the minutes for the regular meetings held on November 4, 2025 and February 3, 2026.

Motion for approval of the minutes made by Huston, seconded by Grasso, and carried 4:0; Grasso, Huston, Peace and Penn voting 'yes'. Canney, Deeker, and Harpster absent.

ADVISE:
Sidewalk Café Guidebook- UDR 26019

Advisory Review and Final Action

March 3, 2026

Members present: Grasso, Huston, Peace and Penn. Canney, Deeker, and Harpster absent.

Arvind Gopalakrishnan, Planning and Development Services Department, 555 S 10th Street Ste 203, Lincoln, NE came forward and stated presented a three-part proposal consisting of a text amendment, updated design standards, and a new Sidewalk Café Guidebook. Staff is continuing to work with the Law Department to finalize the code amendments. The presentation focused primarily on the design standards and guidebook format.

The proposal originated as part of Project O Street and is intended to provide businesses with greater flexibility in designing outdoor dining spaces while also creating a more efficient and streamlined permitting process. The Mayor's Office has been closely involved to ensure the proposal supports broader streetscape improvements and downtown vitality goals.

Applications for sidewalk cafés would be submitted online and reviewed by a multi-department Sidewalk Café Review Committee consisting of representatives from Planning and Development Services, the Health Department, the City Clerk's Office, Transportation and Utilities, the Police Department, Urban Development, and the Fire Prevention Bureau. If an application fully complies with the adopted design standards, it may be approved administratively without review by the Urban Design Committee. Applications that deviate from the standards may require review by the appropriate board.

A significant change from current requirements is the movement away from permanently drilling and bolting fencing into the sidewalk. The updated standards are intended to provide greater flexibility in how café spaces are defined, including the use of temporary or movable barriers. Staff noted that establishments serving alcohol will still be required to provide substantial temporary barriers that meet specified height and enclosure requirements.

The guidebook is designed as a public-facing document to make requirements more accessible and easier to understand. It outlines eligibility criteria, step-by-step application procedures, and design standards. Pedestrian safety remains the primary consideration. The sidewalk is divided into four functional zones: the curb zone, building entrance zone, frontage zone, and pedestrian through zone. A minimum unobstructed pedestrian passageway of five feet is required, including a two-foot straight path within that five-foot width to maintain visibility and accessibility.

Gopalakrishnan explained that several sidewalk café configurations would be permitted. A building-abutting café allows seating directly adjacent to the building façade. A café may also be split by a pedestrian passageway, provided the required clear width is maintained. Curbside cafés may be located adjacent to the curb zone

while preserving the pedestrian through zone. In certain circumstances, a café may extend and be split by a pedestrian passageway while also abutting a neighboring property, provided a notarized agreement from the adjacent property owner is submitted.

Barriers taller than 60 inches would only be permitted at building facades or corners and not along the curb. Prohibited barrier materials include chain link fencing, plastic lattice, untreated lumber, unstable sectional fencing, and trash receptacles.

Furniture must be commercial or contract grade and designed for outdoor use. Applicants are required to submit a site plan, photographs, and manufacturer specification sheets for all proposed furniture and equipment.

Overhead elements such as awnings, pergolas, umbrellas, and roller shades will be reviewed. Umbrellas may display the business name but may not display third-party brand advertising. Lighting must be low-glare, downward facing, and may not include overhead extension cords across pedestrian areas. Heaters must be UL listed and approved by the Fire Prevention Bureau. Staff clarified during discussion that sprinkler requirements apply to permanently mounted overhead or floor-mounted heaters and not to portable freestanding heaters; staff agreed to clarify the language to avoid confusion.

District-specific exceptions were discussed. Sidewalk cafés located within the Haymarket Historic District will require review by the Historic Preservation Commission. Sidewalk cafés within the West Haymarket District are required to use consistent railing systems, some of which remain permanently attached due to grade changes and safety considerations. Staff also stated that a Capitol Environs District map will be added and that cafés in that district must obtain a certificate of appropriateness.

Permits will be issued annually, allowing the City to conduct inspections and ensure compliance. Poor maintenance, failure to meet setback requirements, or misrepresentation of approved elements may result in permit revocation.

Grasso asked about the application and review process.

Paul Barnes, Planning and Development Services Department, 555 S 10th Street Ste 203, Lincoln, NE, stated that Arvind Gopalakrishnan will remain the primary point of contact and that the interdepartmental review committee already exists and has previously reviewed applications. Under the new process, qualifying applications may be approved administratively.

Grasso asked about verification of commercial-grade furniture and whether specification sheets would be required.

Copalkrishnan confirmed that specification sheets must be submitted.

Peace noted that furniture may not always be labeled “commercial grade.”

Grasso stated that specification sheets would assist staff in verifying compliance.

Penn expressed strong support for the guidebook and flexibility in barrier design.

Penn asked about language regarding drilling and bolting into pavement.

Barnes confirmed the intent is to avoid permanent attachments except in limited safety-related circumstances.

Penn questioned restrictions on umbrella branding.

Barnes clarified that business names are permitted, but third-party advertising is not allowed.

Penn and Grasso requested clarification regarding sprinkler requirements for patio heaters.

Copalkrishnan agreed to review and clarify language to distinguish between permanent and portable heaters.

Huston asked whether the standards apply outside the downtown area in other B and O-1 zoning districts.

Barnes confirmed they do apply citywide where sidewalk cafés are permitted.

Grasso complimented the graphics and overall clarity of the guidebook.

Penn recommended revising certain graphics to ensure they clearly depict portable fencing rather than permanently attached barriers.

Peace asked for clarification regarding the five-foot pedestrian requirement and the two-foot clear path within that zone.

Copalkrishnan provided explanation.

Peace also inquired about the decision not to allow temporary dining within parking spaces.

Barnes explained that earlier iterations considered that option but that the current focus remains within the sidewalk zone; the concept could be revisited in the future.

Peace suggested ensuring that the zoning code and guidebook link to one another for ease of access.

Barnes stated the guidebook will be promoted through the Planning website and application materials.

Huston expressed overall support for the proposal.

ACTION:

Motion made by Huston, seconded by Peace, to approve the Sidewalk Café Guidebook and design standards incorporating Committee suggestions and feedback, and carried 4:0; Grasso, Huston, Peace and Penn voting 'yes'. Canney, Deeker, and Harpster absent.

UPDATES:

There were no updates for the committee.

ACTION:

There was no further discussion on this item and no further business to discuss, so the meeting was adjourned at 3:50 pm.

