



Sidewalk Café Guidebook

A Guide to Help Lincoln Businesses Develop and Maintain Sidewalk Cafés



CITY *of* LINCOLN



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THANK YOU FOR YOUR INTEREST IN CREATING A SIDEWALK CAFÉ

The City of Lincoln is committed to supporting local businesses. Whether you are just starting to explore the idea or ready to apply, this guide is here to walk you through every step of the process.

CAFÉ SEATING IN THE RIGHT OF WAY

Lincoln is known for its vibrant dining scene, and our local restaurants and bars provide essential economic, cultural and community benefits for our city. To support the local restaurant industry, the City of Lincoln has developed these design standards to help restaurant and bar owners continue to use the public right of way to expand their dining areas through café seating on sidewalks. This program aims to offer clear and consistent guidance for the use of outdoor dining furnishings and structures in the right of way.

ABOUT THE STANDARDS

These standards ensure that all outdoor dining installations in the public right of way are accessible for emergency responders, provide space for public transit operations and loading zones, and prevent street safety hazards. All installations must comply with ADA standards for accessibility. The standards acknowledge the importance of serving individuals with disabilities, ensuring that everyone in our community can benefit from these enhancements and seating options. By adhering to these design standards, permit holders have clarity about permitted and non-permitted uses and can ensure that their right-of-way outdoor seating meets all requirements.



APPLICATION PROCESS

After you submit an application, a team member will get in touch with you to complete the permitting process. The City of Lincoln will support applicants as much as possible to make sure they meet the permit requirements. **This is what applying for an Sidewalk Café Permit looks like:**

Step 1: Verify Eligibility

Verify that your property falls within an approved zoning district.

Step 2: Complete Application

Complete the Sidewalk Café Permit Application and submit all required materials. Make sure to:

- *Answer all questions completely*
- *Upload all required documents*
- *Pay the \$150 annual fee*

Submitting a complete application helps avoid delays.

Step 3: City Review

City staff review new applications to confirm compliance with zoning, safety, and design standards.

Step 4: Receive Your Permit

Once approved, the City Clerk's Office will contact you with next steps to finalize payment and issue your permit. Cafés must be set up as approved, display the permit on site, and remain subject to inspection.

Prepare Application Materials Checklist

Before starting your application, collect the following materials:

- ☐ Business and property information
- ☐ Required permits
- ☐ Photos of proposed furniture and equipment
- ☐ A site plan with dimensions
- ☐ Proof of insurance
- ☐ A \$5,000 bond, if applicable

Questions about the design standards or potential deviations should be directed to the Planning and Development Services Department at **402-441-7491**.

PERMIT ELIGIBILITY

Sufficient pedestrian passageway

My outdoor café would leave AT LEAST 5 feet of unobstructed clear passageway on the sidewalk.	Yes, you are eligible.
My outdoor café would leave LESS THAN 5 feet of unobstructed clear passageway on the sidewalk.	No, you are not eligible.

Alcohol sales

My outdoor café does NOT sell alcohol	Does not have any barrier around it.	Yes, you are eligible.
My outdoor café DOES sell alcohol	Does not have any barrier around it.	No, you are not eligible.
	Does have a barrier with an opening of less than 8 feet.	Yes, you are eligible.

Proximity to permanent objects in the right of way

My outdoor café:

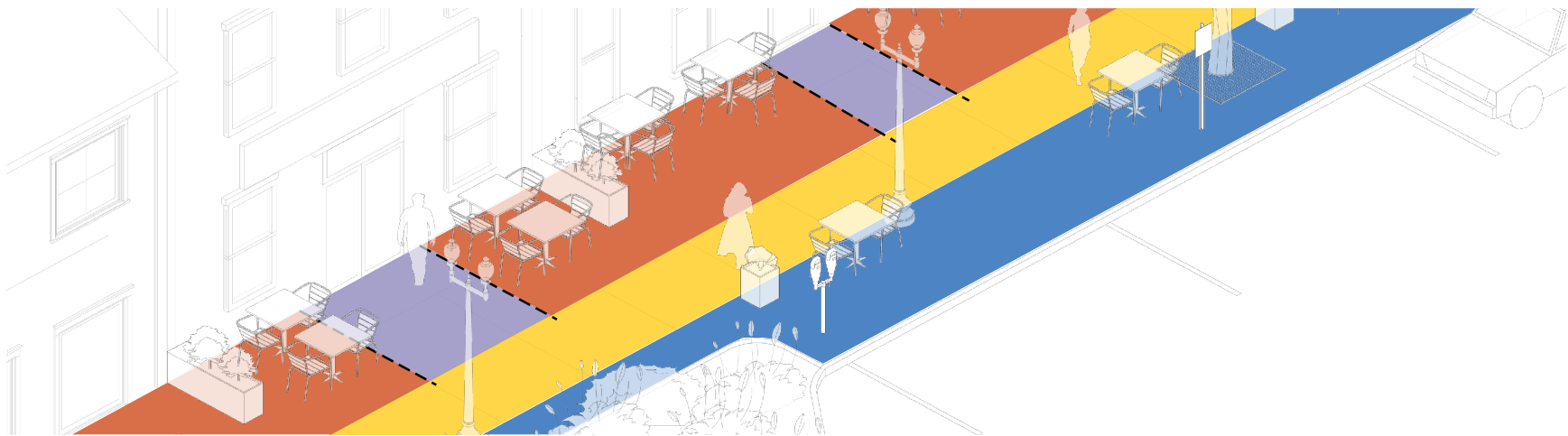
Is within 5 feet from crosswalk landings, curb ramps, bus stops, or bus shelters.	No, you are not eligible.
Is within 2 feet from the edge of the curb from driveways, parking, or loading zones.	
Is within 3 feet from fire hydrants, parking meters, signage, or bike racks.	
Has a clear zone of less than 5 feet in the front of business entry & exit points.	
Has a clear zone of less than 5 feet in front of business entry and exit points.	
Maintains a clearance of less than 10 feet from crosswalks.	
Is near an intersection or driveway, but located outside of the sight triangle defined by the City.	Yes, you are eligible.

USING THE DESIGN GUIDEBOOK

City of Lincoln Café Seating Program Design Principles

Design for maintenance • Accessible for all • Quality materials and finishes • Easily removable

Throughout the design guidebook, diagrams illustrate requirements and recommendations to obtain a sidewalk café permit.



Sidewalk Zones Explained

Curb Zone

This is the area next to the street. Café seating may be placed here if all required buffers and safety clearances are maintained.

Building Entrance Zone

Keep this space open in front of doorways to allow safe and easy access in and out of the building.

Frontage Zone

This is the area along the building where café seating is typically placed.

Pedestrian Through Zone

Keep at least 5 feet completely clear for a pedestrian passageway that enables people to walk through comfortably and safely.

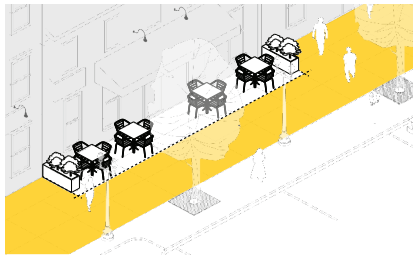
SIDEWALK CAFÉ TYPES

If your café is directly against your building, there must be at least five feet of clear passageway between the café and the street.

If café seating is placed both near the building and at the curb, the five-foot passageway must run between them. Sidewalk cafés with no alcohol sales are not required to enclose the café space with rigid barriers.

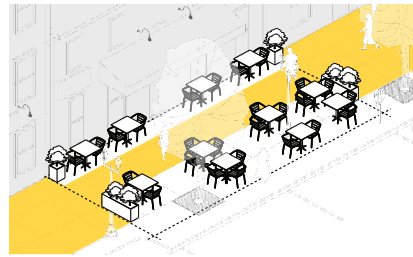
In areas with special site characteristics, the City may require a wider passageway.

 min. 5' unobstructed pedestrian passageway



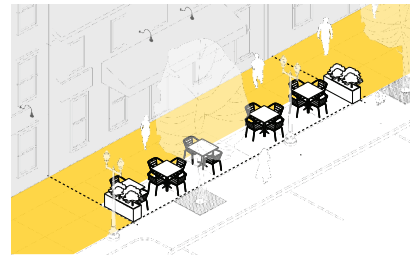
Building abutting

Sidewalk café located directly next to the building.



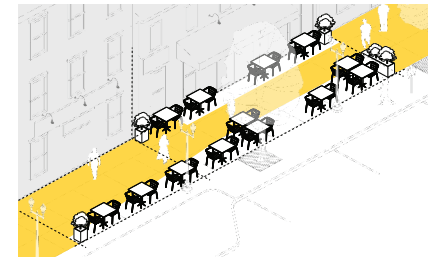
Split by pedestrian passageway

Sidewalk café on both sides of the pedestrian passageway, encroaching the curb zone.



Curbside

Sidewalk café near the curb side of the pedestrian passageway.



Split by pedestrian passageway and abutting neighboring property

Sidewalk café on both sides of the pedestrian passageway, and abutting part of the neighboring property.

SIDEWALK CAFÉ CRITERIA

Use of Public Property

By definition, your café must sit on public sidewalk space between your building and the curb.

Your café may not extend into the street or public parking spaces.

If you would like your café footprint to use the space in front of a neighboring business, you will need a notarized agreement from that property owner.

When reasonable, new sidewalk cafés should align with existing cafés on the same block face to accommodate a consistent, direct pedestrian passageway.



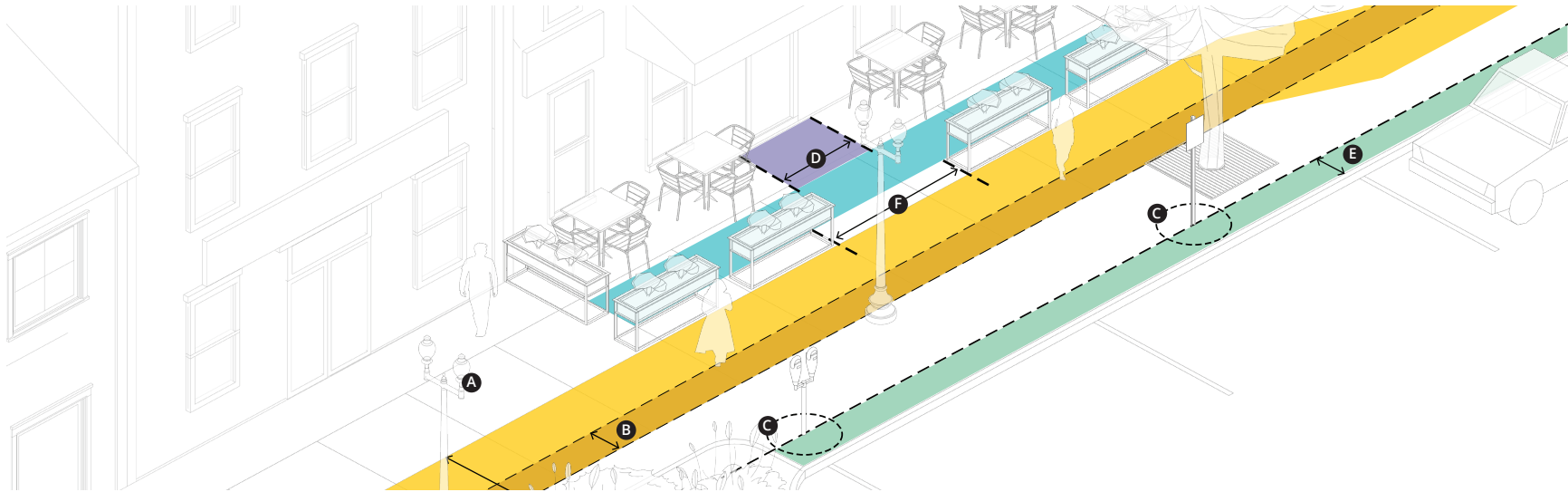
Serving Alcohol?

If you plan to serve alcohol, your sidewalk café must be delineated with movable rigid barriers or planters.

You must hold a valid liquor license from the Nebraska Liquor Control Commission.



REQUIRED SETBACKS AND BUFFERS



A Pedestrian through zone: Keep at least 5 feet of sidewalk completely clear of furniture, heaters, planters, signs, cords, or other objects.

B Clear visibility zone: Maintain a straight, continuous 2-foot wide path along the sidewalk so people can move through without obstacles.

C Obstacle buffer: Keep café furniture and barriers at least 3 feet away from fire hydrants, parking meters, signs, and bike racks.

D Entry/exit point: Leave a 5-foot clear space in front of business doorways so customers can enter and exit safely.

E Curb buffer: Keep café items at least 2 feet away from the curb near driveways, parking spaces, and loading zones.

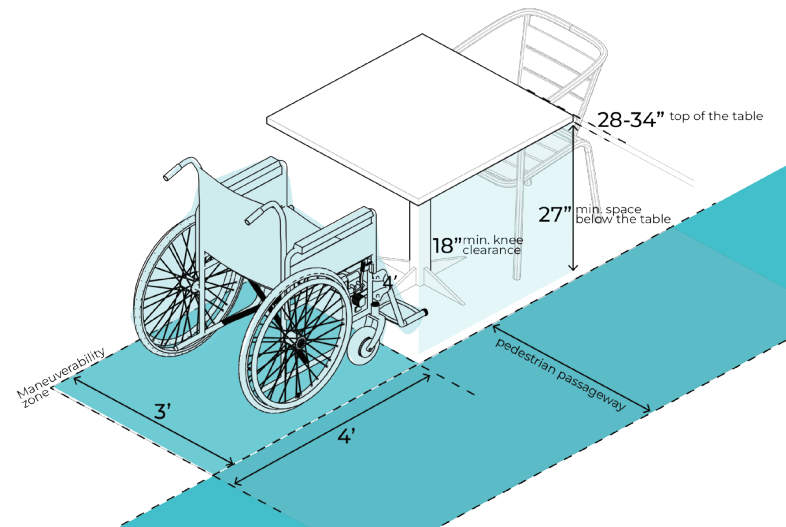
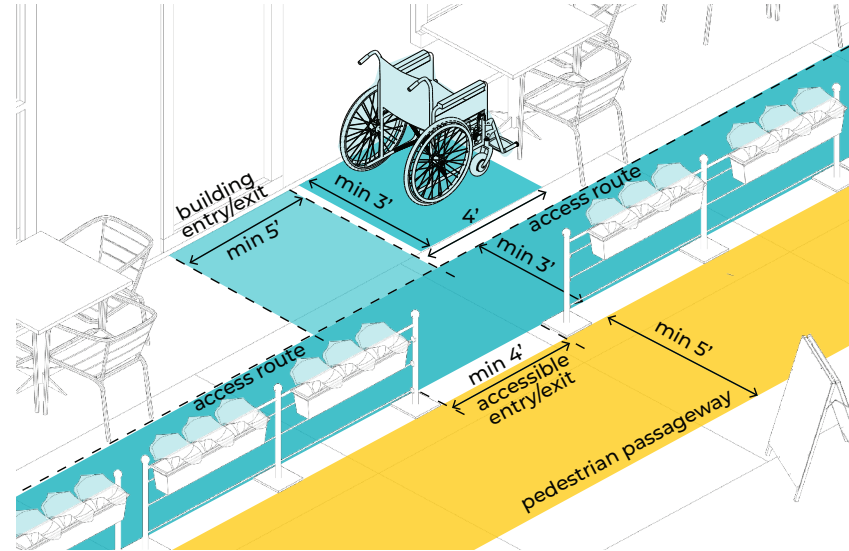
F Sidewalk café entry/exit point: Minimum 4', maximum 8' wide entry/exit point.

Additional requirements:

- Stay at least 10 feet away from crosswalks.
- Keep café setups 5 feet away from crosswalk ramps, curb ramps, bus stops, and bus shelters.

ACCESSIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

- The sidewalk cafe space must have a minimum 4-foot wide accessible entry/exit from the adjacent pedestrian.
- Cafes serving with capacity over 50 people must have two such entry points.
- Inside the café, a minimum three-foot-wide accessible path that connects accessible features must be provided.
- At least 5% of tables, but no fewer than one, must meet ADA standards:
 - **Table height:** 28 to 34 inches (measured from the ground to the top surface)
 - **Knee clearance:** 27 inches high, 30 inches wide, 19 inches deep
- Surfaces must be relatively flat, with a maximum 2% cross slope (perpendicular to the curb) and 5% running slope (parallel to the curb).



RESPONSIBILITIES AND MAINTENANCE

Sidewalk café permit holders are responsible for keeping their café seating well-maintained and in good repair to ensure safety, accessibility, and cleanliness of these spaces. Permit holders must follow these maintenance procedures:

Operational Requirements

- Adhere to the approved layout: your café must match the plan approved by the City. Any changes, including furniture types, layout adjustments, or added elements like heaters, require City review and approval.
- Keep your permit on display: your active sidewalk café permit must be visible from the public sidewalk at all times.
- Sidewalk cafés may operate during hours noted in your approved application. You may not operate earlier or later without written permission from the City.
- You are responsible for keeping the sidewalk café and surrounding area clean, safe, and free of debris at all times.

PERMIT CONDITIONS

Emergencies and Complaints

- The City or emergency services may require the temporary removal or closure of your sidewalk café in the event of public safety concerns, construction or utility work, or severe weather.
- If complaints are received about safety, accessibility, or obstruction, the City may inspect your café and require corrective action.

Renewing Your Permit

- Sidewalk café permits are valid for one year.
- To continue operating, you must submit a renewal application before your current permit expires.
- If there are no changes to your layout, a streamlined renewal process may be available.
- The City may deny renewal if your café has violated regulations or failed inspections.

What Could Cause Your Permit to be Revoked?

The City reserves the right to revoke your permit at any time if you:

- Fail to maintain the required clearances or accessible paths
- Operate outside of approved hours or boundaries
- Do not maintain cleanliness or safety standards
- Ignore the required corrections following a City inspection
- Misrepresent your café setup in your application

GENERAL DESIGN REQUIREMENTS

Furniture

- All proposed furniture (tables, chairs, benches, etc.) must be commercial-grade and durable for outdoor use. Their specifications must be included in the permit application.
- Furniture should be removable and not permanently affixed to the sidewalk.
- When not in use for extended periods of time, businesses are encouraged to remove the furniture from the sidewalk.

Materials

- Acceptable materials include stainless steel, powder-coated aluminum or steel, and treated hardwoods or composites proven for durability.
- While not a requirement, we recommend that applicants consider water drainage on flat surfaces when selecting furniture. Tabletop selections are encouraged to include metal meshes, slats, or alternative materials like solid surface acrylic to prevent water pooling.
- A variety of materials may be used for landscaped planters, but materials that are susceptible to salt damage like concrete, are discouraged.

Barriers and Defining Features

- If alcohol will be served, the café must be enclosed by a rigid barrier or other defining feature at least 32" in height.
- Barriers must maintain a minimum 4-foot-wide open entry/exit, preferably located in front of the business entrance, and shall not exceed 8 feet in width.
- When more than one entry/exit exists, only one entry/exit may remain open; additional entries/exits must be controlled by a gate or an approved barrier, unless otherwise approved by the City Council.
- Sidewalk cafés with no alcohol sales are not required to enclose the café space with rigid barriers.

Temporary vs Permanent Elements

- All sidewalk café elements, except those attached directly to the building, must be temporary and removable without tools.
- Any element requiring drilling or bolting into the pavement is considered permanent and is generally not allowed unless otherwise approved by the City.

TYPES OF RIGID BARRIERS, OR OTHER DEFINING FEATURES

Requirements

- Barriers must be free-standing, stable, well-balanced, and removable. They must not pose any risk of tipping or causing tripping hazards.
- Height and placement of barriers, and other defining features will be reviewed case-by-case, particularly near street or alley intersections where sight triangles are critical for the safety of pedestrians, cyclists, and vehicles.
- Barriers must maintain clear visibility between the street and café.
- Planters and rope barriers must have a lower edge no more than 27 inches above the ground so people with vision impairments using a cane can detect them.
- Rigid barriers taller than 60 inches may be permitted only at café corners or adjacent to building façades, not along curbs.
- Elevated Sidewalk cafés must employ a secured fence as the rigid barrier of at least 42" in height along any elevated portion of the sidewalk café.
- Businesses must ensure regular maintenance of the planters and keep the plants healthy, well-pruned, and free of debris.



Prohibited barrier types

- Unstable sectional fencing
- Chain-link fencing
- Corten steel
- Plastic lattice
- Untreated lumber
- Trash receptacles used as barriers
- **Or any material not intended for permanent outdoor architectural use.**

TYPES OF RIGID BARRIERS OR OTHER DEFINING FEATURES

The City of Lincoln encourages creative, well-designed, and visually appealing solutions for sidewalk café enclosures, including planters, and other rigid barriers.

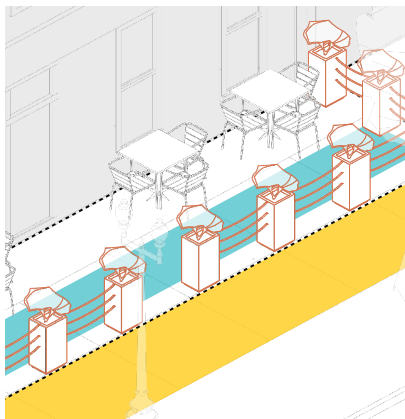
- Acceptable materials include:

- **Metal:** Powder-coated steel, aluminum, or wrought iron with a durable, weather-resistant finish.
- **Wood:** Hardwoods or treated softwoods suitable for outdoor environments.
- **Cable or tensioned rail systems:** Stainless or coated steel cables supported by a rigid frame.

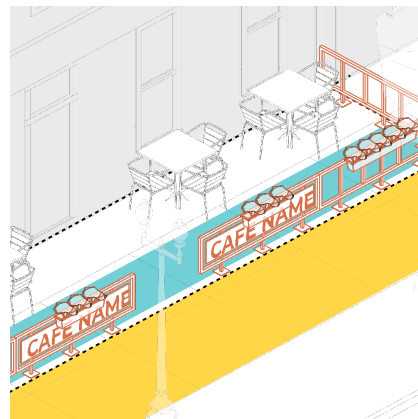
- **Planters:** Constructed from metal, wood, or other stable, weather-resistant materials such as high-density polystyrene. Heavy materials like stone or concrete may be used sparingly.

- **Tempered glass or acrylic panels:** Supported by metal or wood framing for a clean, modern aesthetic.

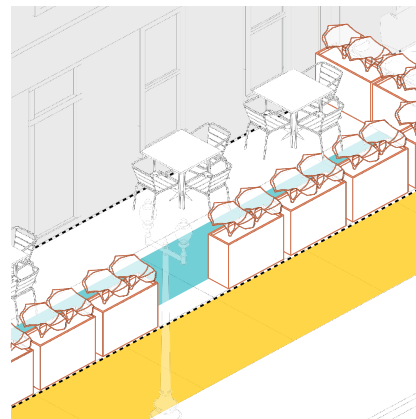
- The above are approved types of movable rigid barriers that may be used to enclose a sidewalk café space. The selection of materials, dimensions, and placement of these barriers will be reviewed and approved on a case-by-case basis.



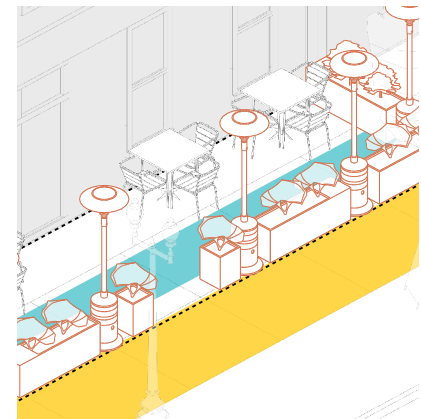
Planter and rope barriers



Customized movable
barricade/partitions
with planter boxes



Landscape planters



Landscape planters +
heaters

OVERHEAD ELEMENTS

Permitted

- Roller shades will be approved on a case-by-case basis and must maintain an opacity of 95% or less, corresponding to a minimum transparency (openness) level of 5% or more; fully opaque shades are not permitted.
- Shades with higher openness percentages let in more light and offer a clearer outside view, making them ideal for spaces like sidewalk cafés that allow visibility to the sidewalk and from the sidewalk into the café.
- Awnings, shades, railings, umbrellas, and other sidewalk café features may only display the name of the business and should not be used to advertise any other products.

NOT Permitted

- Shade sails are not permitted. Awnings, coverings, and shades must not obscure the building façade or disrupt the transparency of the ground-level frontage.



Awning with the business name

✓ **Permitted.**



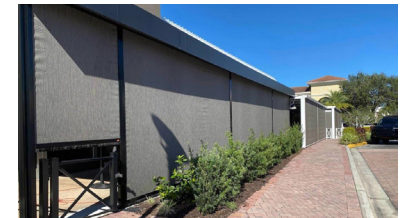
Umbrella with a brand name

✗ **Not permitted.**



Transparent shades

✓ **Permitted.**

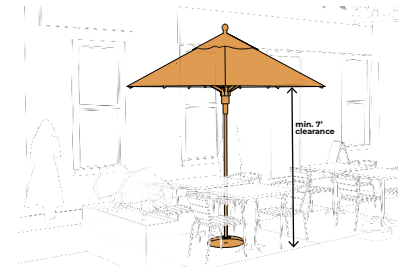
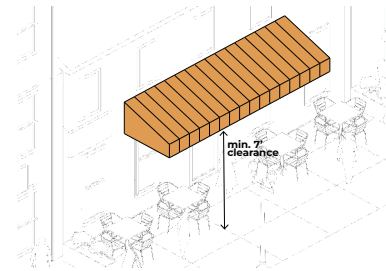


Opaque shades

✗ **Not permitted.**

Clearance

- Overhead elements, including awnings, umbrellas, pergolas, or other elements are permitted as long as they meet the code requirements and do not obstruct circulation or visibility for pedestrians or drivers.
- Retractable awnings are allowed, as long as the awning is fully supported by its attachment to the building and not via vertical posts on the sidewalk.

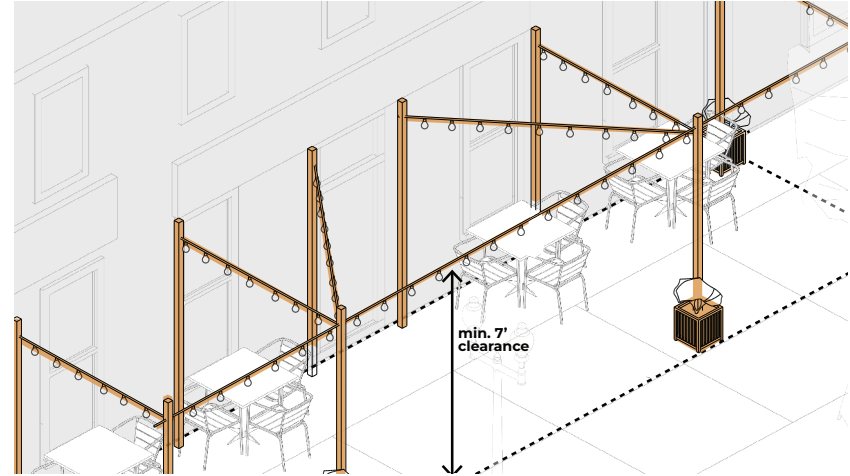


Awnings and umbrellas must have a minimum clearance of 7'

LIGHTING AND HEATING

Lighting

- Lighting must be low-glare, downward-facing, temporary in nature, and must be UL listed, meaning it's been safety-tested and approved for outdoor use.
- Power cables that extend overhead or on the ground surface of the pedestrian passageway are prohibited.
- Lighting equipment must not be attached to or strung through street trees or any other public infrastructure.
- Lighting elements must avoid added glare for pedestrians or drivers. Approved lighting must be low-level output and directed downward.



Posts with overhead festoon lighting

Heating

- Heaters included as part of sidewalk café space must be UL-listed, approved for outdoor use, portable, and fully compliant with the current City of Lincoln fire codes. Wood-burning fire pits are not allowed.
- Propane and electric heaters are allowed, subject to approval from the Fire Prevention Inspector.
- Floor-mounted patio heaters must maintain a minimum clearance of 5 feet from buildings and any combustible elements such as awnings or overhangs.
- Heaters may not be permanently installed in the public right-of-way, but must be securely fastened to the ground using a cable and lock system, and shall not be relocated during business hours.



HAYMARKET EXCEPTIONS



Historic Haymarket

Since the Historic Haymarket is a designated local landmark, all proposed sidewalk cafés within the area are subject to review and approval by the Historic Preservation Commission.

Per standard 16.6 of the Historic Preservation Design Standards, sidewalk cafés and other dining areas in or adjacent to the public right-of-way should be designed with high-quality materials and low railings to avoid obscuring views of the historic buildings.

The proposed design of the sidewalk cafés must complement the architectural elements of the abutting building.

Sidewalk cafés located on loading docks must have a secured barrier along the full length of the dock.



West Haymarket

All new sidewalk cafés in the West Haymarket are required to use a consistent railing design, as shown on the right. No other railing types are permitted in this area.

You can find out if your business is located in the Historic Haymarket or West Haymarket by searching your address at Lincoln.NE.gov/GIS.



CAPITOL ENVIRONS EXCEPTIONS

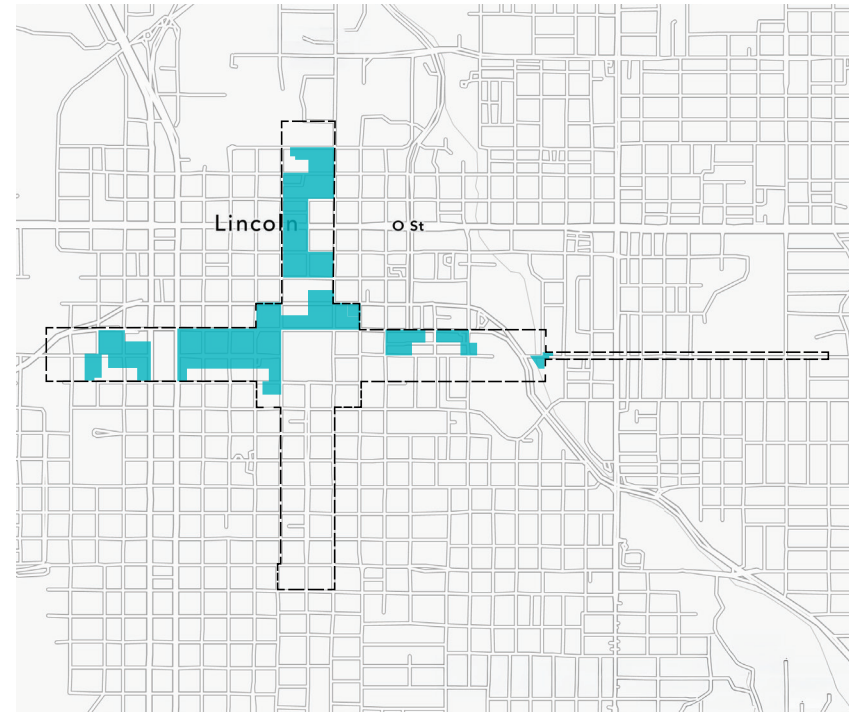
The Capitol Environs District is a special zoning area that surrounds the Nebraska State Capitol. If your business is located within this district, additional design rules apply to sidewalk cafés.

All proposed sidewalk cafés in this area must follow the Capitol Environs Design Standards. In addition to submitting a Sidewalk Café Permit application, businesses must receive a Certificate of Appropriateness from the Nebraska Capitol Environs Commission.

The Sidewalk Café Design Standards in this guide explain requirements for café layout, furniture, barriers, and other elements. These standards should be used together with the Capitol Environs Design Standards to ensure sidewalk cafés fit the character of the area around the Capitol.

Centennial Mall

Centennial Mall is a formal landscaped pedestrian mall within the Capitol Environs District that runs between K Street and M Street, and between P Street and R Street. The mall area is designated as a City park. Sidewalk cafés located within these park areas must also receive approval from the City of Lincoln Parks and Recreation Director.



- [- -] Capitol Environs District
- Sidewalk café eligible zones

RESOURCES

Application Form and Checklist

To start your application, visit [Insert link to the webpage/application]

If you need a printed copy, contact the Planning and Development Department using the information below.

City Code References

For full details on sidewalk café regulations, see:

Lincoln Municipal Code Chapter 14.54 – Sidewalk Cafés

[Insert hyperlink to code section]

Who to Contact for Help

Have questions? We're here to help. Contact the City of Lincoln Planning and Development Services Department:

Planning and Development Services Department

555 S. 10th Street, Suite 213

Phone: 402-441-7491

Email: plandev@lincoln.ne.gov

Website: [Insert website URL]

APPENDIX

