



Journal photo by Dan D

Heavy Constructors Inc.'s giant backhoe labors along the 500 block of Main Street in downtown Rapid City despite Wednesday's snowstorm. On the same day, the 700 block was reopened to traffic.

Business and backhoes

Reaction mixed to downtown street project

By Dan Daly
Journal Staff Writer

With street construction becoming a spectator sport on Rapid City's Main Street, downtown business people have front-row seats to the project.

But how has it affected their bottom line? It depends on whom you ask.

Some merchants say traffic in their stores has slowed a lot since the crews began tearing out and replacing the pavement in front of their stores.

Others say business has slowed but not as badly as they expected.

The sounds of heavy machinery have replaced the usual bustle of cars and trucks along Rapid City's main

thoroughfare.

Old men and young boys pause along the narrow sidewalks to watch the graceful backhoes and lumbering front-end loaders do their work amid the Main Street muck and gravel.

Reconstruction, which has been going on at various times on East Main for months, began in earnest last fall when Fifth Street and Eighth Street intersections were blocked off and rebuilt.

After a Christmas shopping season respite, the work resumed full tilt in January, when the streets themselves underwent construction.

Tim Powell of the Red Wing shoe store, 519 Main St., said his business for March was actually ahead of March 1991, when the street was paved and customers could park right out front.

"Other shops I've talked to have also been weathering the storm fairly well," Powell said. "People have not had too much trouble getting to us."

Clancy Kingsbury, manager of Who's Hobby House, 717 Main St., said sales in January, February and

so far in March were running ahead of the same figures last year.

"Actually it didn't hurt us as bad as I was expecting," said Kingsbury. The project started on that block the second week of January, reopening to two-way traffic on Wednesday.

But hobby supplies are the kinds of products that "people are willing to walk a block to find," Kingsbury added.

Downtown Rapid City has become a collection of specialty stores in recent years. Customers looking for a special product will find the store that sells it, Powell said.

"(But) some of my neighbors say they were hurt pretty bad," Kingsbury said.

A woman at West River Office Products, a few doors down from the hobby shop, described the construction project as "horrible, rough" for the business.

"I would have to say our traffic is down, but when people do come in, they buy more items," said Mark Hirsch, owner of the Bible and Book Store for the past five years. At 616

Main St., the store is midway between two construction projects.

His prospects are less certain when the construction moves directly in front of the store, Hirsch said. But he will open the back door, provide all parking and hope for the best.

Powell, who also heads the United Downtown Committee, said special signs, a telephone hotline and other construction project promotions apparently had been helping get customers downtown.

By the time the project is finished in November, Main Street will be rebuilt from storefront to storefront between East and West boulevards. Crews are replacing everything from the sewer lines up.

Heavy Constructors Inc. of Rapid City is in charge of the \$3.6 million project.

Next year a nearly identical project is slated for St. Joseph Street.

Powell said merchants along the street are starting to take notice, but his message for them is that street work is not fatal for business.