

Public relations project

Downtown street work poses challenge for merchants

By Dan Daly
Journal Staff Writer

As downtown drivers negotiate around the Mount Rushmore Road and Fifth Street detours, merchants know the current round of street work is just a warm-up for the real Main Street construction, set to begin in January.

Rebuilding Main Street, downtown merchants say, will be as much a public relations project as a construction job.

"This is a skirmish," said Tim Powell of Red Wing Shoes and head of the United Downtown Committee. "The war hasn't started, yet."

City officials have taken steps to ensure Main Street stores will remain open throughout the project. The challenge will be to convince shoppers that downtown Rapid City is not closed for business.

The downtown group is waiting for January to launch its big campaign to attract shoppers to Main Street. Plans call for various ad campaigns using the theme "We'll light the way." Also, a telephone hot line will be set up; callers will get a recorded update about the latest detours and routes.

Officials even considered installing a temporary, low-frequency radio station — similar to the Devils Tower prairie dog reports — to broadcast information about the project.

On its own, the United Downtown Committee soon will hire a promotions director to put together various sales and promotions through the construction project.

Powell said the new director should be hired by the end of November.

The current plan is to rip out the pavement at the Main Street intersections with Mount Rushmore Road and Fifth Street. The streets will be completely rebuilt: new sewers, water mains, curb-and-gutter and streets.

If the work is not finished by Thanksgiving — the beginning of the crucial Christmas shopping season — the street will be paved over and the intersections reopened.

When construction resumes in January, Fifth Street and Mount Rushmore Road will remain open as



Journal photo by Steve McEnr

Backhoe diggers and detour signs will become common sights in downtown Rapid City. The challenge for merchants will be to convince shoppers that it is otherwise business as usual.

north-south detours for Main Street. By November 1992, Main Street between East Boulevard and West Boulevard will be completely redone.

A similar project on adjoining St. Joseph Street has been slated for 1993.

The committee itself is in some ways a response to the project. Formed in August with help from the Rapid City Area Chamber of Commerce, it now has about 55 members. Each will pay \$200 a year.

He said the response to the committee had been good, despite an uneasiness by some business owners who remember the failed Business Improvement District and other failed attempts at uniting downtown mer-

chants.

Downtown businesses are still haggling with each other about the construction schedule — motel owners to the east don't want their end of the street torn up in the summer, while merchants are more concerned about the Christmas shopping season.

"My busy season may be the other guy's slow time. We're trying to minimize the inconvenience for everybody," Powell said.

Powell said businesses will be affected by the construction, those that depend on walk-in customers perhaps feeling the pinch a bit more.

He said some stores might go out of business or move, citing the construction as the reason.

"(But) if you're solvent now, you will be solvent when the construction is done," Powell added.

Most downtown shops are specialists of sorts: Customers seek them out to find products they can't get elsewhere. Their customers will find their way in regardless of the construction.

And apparently the project is not scaring merchants away from downtown, Powell noted. Just a handful of storefronts remains vacant.

After the street work is finished, crews will remove and replace sidewalks downtown. Powell said new storefronts would be blocked off during the construction.