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Downtown merchants urge caution on nodule expansion

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About a dozen Rapid City businessmen expressed support for the downtown beautification project Monday but cautioned Mayor Art LaCroix during a private meeting to "take a hard look" at any proposals to expand it.

City officials say there is enough money to build eight more pedestrian nodules if the merchants want them.

Eight corners currently are being rebuilt in the city's historic core area — four each on St. Joe and Main streets. But the project has been criticized by some shoppers and a few downtown merchants in recent weeks as construction equipment hampered both vehicle and foot traffic.

Many of those who commented publicly felt the project will "look nice" when complete but question the \$465,000 price tag.

The project originally contained 16 small, park-like areas with benches, trees and water fountains, but it was trimmed to eight when some merchants objected to the cost of filling in old sidewalk basements. The basements must be filled in at the property owner's expense before the corner nodules can be built. Reducing the project to eight corners solved that problem on all but two corners.

LaCroix said the project is what a task force for the Downtown Association decided the majority of merchants wanted, even if it does not please everyone.

Some of the merchants are unhappy

about recent negative publicity on the project. Harold Oberg, owner of Oberg's Jewelry, 510 Sixth St., said he and the others who attended the Monday meeting agreed not to talk to the press about what they want done, because recent news stories have been "badly distorted and negative."

There has been some discussion about expanding the project to the original plan of 16 corners. Enough federal Urban Renewal dollars are left to do that, according to City Public Works Director Leonard Swanson.

The first eight nodules cost slightly more than \$54,000 each, not counting another \$43,000 in special assessments against two property owners who had sidewalk basements.

However, Swanson says the work would certainly be cheaper if advertised for bid today, because the construction business is much slower than it was last fall when Brablec Construction Inc., Rapid City, was the only company to bid it.

Swanson said the city is wrapping up its post-1972 urban renewal program with more federal money than expected, because it used some of those dollars as matching funds to get yet more federal dollars from other programs.

He doesn't know exactly how much money will be available for additional work in the downtown area (if the merchants decide they want it), but he says there is enough to do either another eight nodules or build a pedestrian walkway from the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center to the downtown area.

"But I'm not sure there's enough money for both. That will depend on how the bids come in on some of our other projects, such as completing the bike path," he said.

Some critics of the downtown project have said the money should have been spent on other things, such as school crossing guards. But LaCroix said the money could only be spent in certain ways and within a certain area of the city. "Personally, I would have liked spending it on street repair, but we can't do that," he said.

LaCroix also pointed out that the city had to use the money for some project like this or let another city have it. Rejecting the federal money would not have saved the taxpayers from having it spent, he said.

Others have complained that the nodules interfered with traffic. However, the South Dakota Division of Transportation approved the proposed projects after the city changed the design to leave a full 36 feet of highway for three traffic lanes, according to Assistant District Engineer Jim Henn.

Rapid City Police Department accident statistics also indicate that none of the four intersections where nodules are being built are among the city's 21 most accident prone intersections.

LaCroix said when the construction is complete in late June and the temporary disruption of traffic is ended, most people will see the beautification project as a "very positive" thing. "Of course, you can't please everyone," he said.