

Downtown dilemma



Journal photo/Steve McEnroe

Overpark in the downtown business district, and you'll be feeding a meter fine box like this one. Parking violations have decreased downtown since tickets went from \$2 to \$5, city officials say.

Parking ramp expected to ease stall shortage

Can't find a place to park downtown? Rapid City officials hope a parking ramp to be built in 1998 will help ease crowding downtown. Business owners say the ramp will help, but most don't think it will solve the problem. This is the first in a series of stories looking at the viewpoints of business owners, employees, shoppers and a parking enforcement officer. Tomorrow, a look at the situation from the viewpoint of business people.



By Heidi Bell
Journal Staff Writer

Think downtown Rapid City needs more parking?

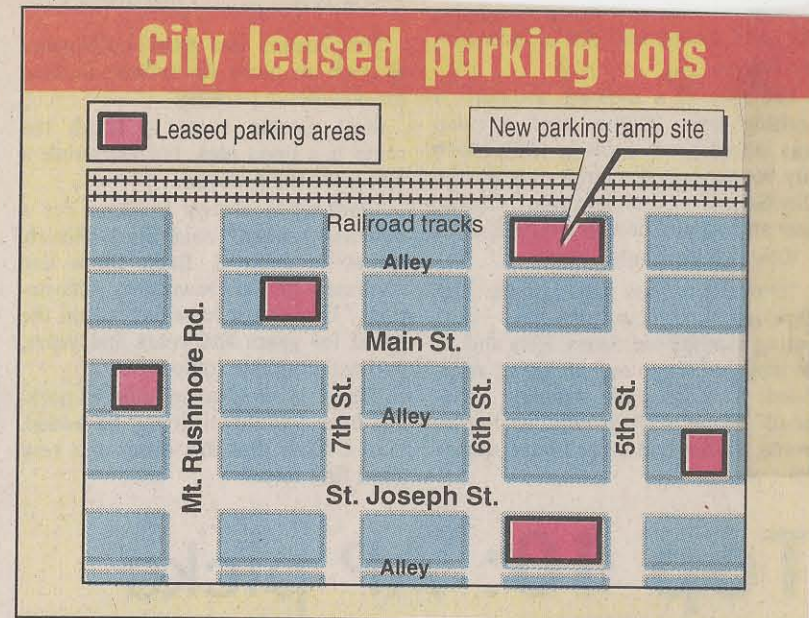
So did your parents — and maybe even their parents.

Consider this line from a city planning document: "Downtown parking facilities are ... fast ap-

proaching the saturation point, and with the growth of the city, remedial action is necessary if business activity is to be successfully continued and promoted in the ... central area."

Even in 1948, when those words were written, people were concerned about what they saw as a lack of parking in the downtown business district.

Fifty years later, Rapid City resi-



Journal graphic/Marty Two Bulls

dents have the same concerns. In the latest effort to add space, city officials plan to break ground this spring for a two-level parking ramp that will add 170 parking spaces to the city's current total of 402 leased spots. It will be completed by next fall.

The 320-car ramp will replace the 150-car leased lot at Sixth and Main streets by the railroad tracks north of

Main (see map). Estimated cost of the structure, which will provide leased parking for downtown employees and residents, is \$2.5 million, to be paid through parking ticket and lease revenue — not tax dollars.

During construction, people who lease spots in that lot will be asked to park at Fifth and New York streets.

See **Parking** on page **A2**

Parking: Leaving property on tax rolls

Continued from page A1

Plans are to shuttle them downtown with city buses, said Community Development Director Bonnie Hughes.

Hughes said a ramp makes sense. "You don't want to buy any more property and take it off the tax rolls," she said, so instead of building out you build up.

The two-level ramp will be designed to blend in with surroundings, she said. Levels will not be added in the future.

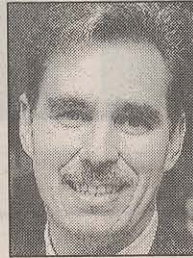
The idea of a parking structure is nothing new. Hughes said a ramp was talked about back in 1984, when city voters passed a tax to pay for the City/School Administration Center, new airport and downtown parking.

Why is it happening now?

"Downtown has seen some nice development occur," Hughes said, noting that the old Sears, Elks and JC Penney buildings are all being renovated or have been recently renovated. Along with ground-level store fronts, those buildings house upper-floor offices.



Hughes



Hirsch



Knecht



Senftner

That means lots more employees, as well as more customers, looking for downtown parking.

Most people seem to think the ramp is a good idea, but few think it will solve the problem.

"Parking is always an issue for a downtown area," said Mark Hirsch, owner of Bible & Book Store and chairman of the Downtown Association. "Employees have parked on the street for years and years and years, and will continue to do so.

"There is no final solution to parking in a downtown area," he added, "but I think that this ramp is a very good first step."

With the additional downtown traffic created by renovated buildings, Hirsch doesn't expect the new ramp to result in abundant on-street parking. "I think we're just going to be about breaking even."

David Knecht, owner of The Perfect Hanging Gallery on Kansas City Street, would like to see all downtown employees be required to park in leased parking lots instead of on the street. "That's the only salvation that I can see for downtown," he said. "If you ain't got parking, you ain't got business."

Other suggestions:

■ Build more than one parking

ramp downtown.

■ Turn the metered lot at Sixth and Main into three-hour or four-hour free parking.

■ Build a second layer of parking on the street itself.

■ Let customers park for free in the new parking ramp.

■ Let customers and/or employees park for free in the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center parking lot, then use city buses to shuttle them downtown.

Hughes said that last suggestion was tried a few years ago during the holidays. "We nary had one taker on it," she said, though she's willing to look at it again.

She's not convinced that downtown employees are ready for a shuttle. "We're all pretty independent," she said, and most people want to come and go without waiting for a bus.

Dan Senftner of Dan Senftner's Plummer Piano & Organ wants the city to consider building more than one parking ramp in the business district.

Downtown is thriving, he said, and "we want to keep it that way."