

No parking, no spending

Shoppers may just drive by

Editors note: "I was going to stop, but I couldn't find a parking place." Downtown business people in Rapid City don't want you to ever use that excuse again. But most agree that while a new parking ramp planned for construction next year might help the current parking crunch, it probably won't solve it. Today's story, part of a series on downtown parking, looks at parking from the business point of view. Tomorrow, we talk with shoppers.

By Heidi Bell
Journal Staff Writer



When The Perfect Hanging Gallery was in business on St. Joe Street, sale prices weren't the key to attracting customers.

Parking places were.

Owner David Knecht had customers who carried picture-framing jobs in their cars for weeks until they saw a parking space near his shop.

He couldn't blame them, especially the elderly ones. "They're not going to carry a picture four blocks in the wind," he said.

Downtown parking is a problem in Knecht's



Journal photo/Steve McEnroe

Parking meters in the lot at Sixth and Main streets now cost 25 cents for one hour of parking.

view. "That's the main reason I moved out," he said. In fact, a small private parking lot for employees and customers was one of the main draws of the Kansas City Street building his store now occupies.

"I've got three times as many people coming in the store (now) as I had down there," he said.

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Parking: Would-be shoppers drive away

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Knecht isn't the only downtown business owner who sees parking as "a problem." But what, specifically, is the problem?

"There's not enough," said Jill Maguire, who owns American Pie Bistro and Marketplace on St. Joe. "(Customers) can either drive around and waste their lunch hour in search of a space or pull into the next place down the street.

"It needs to be a little more convenient," she said.

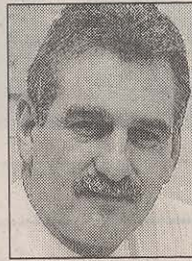
How convenient? "The problem is everybody thinks they should be able to park right at the doorstep of where they're doing business," said Lee Geiger, an architect who has a second-floor office on Main Street.

"Out at the mall, you'll park three blocks away from the building, but it's not a problem because you can see your destination," he said. "It's very much a visual thing."

Rich Baumann of Neugebauer's Jewelry has a different take. "The



Knecht



Baumann



Maguire

biggest problem we have is people who work and live downtown parking on the street," he said.

Like many downtown businesses, Neugebauer's provides parking for its employees in city-owned lots. That takes care of employees doing the "two-hour shuffle," moving their cars several times a day to take advantage of free two-hour parking.

"I can't understand why any employer would not provide parking for his employees," Baumann said, adding that it costs more to lose an employee for 15 minutes three times a day than to pay for her parking.

chant expects them to take care of their own parking," he said.

Tina Ficek also sees a lack of downtown parking.

"That's the main thing that we lose business from," said Ficek, who works at Best Little Hairhouse. "Especially in the wintertime. People don't like to walk so far."

Many businesses are willing to pay extra to make shopping downtown convenient for customers.

"I do have customers that say they would have stopped but they could not find a place to park," said Dan Senftner of Dan Senftner's Plummer

But he acknowledges that many employees don't feel they can afford a \$30-per-month parking space. "If they're doing the two-hour shuffle, then the mer-

Piano and Organ. "I do get complaints about \$5 parking tickets. And I pay some of those for customers myself."

Over in the metered zone on Quincy Street, Radiology Associates keeps a jar of change handy for patients who don't have coins.

Global Market owner Dan Crain thinks the proposed parking ramp should provide free customer parking. "I would pay a certain amount a year just to have that."

Knecht worries that parking meters and stiffer fines are hitting customers instead of the downtown employees they are supposed to target.

"My concern is the fact that we charge people to park downtown and our competition is the mall (where parking is free)," he said. "So here we are penalizing the people who pay most of the taxes."

Geiger isn't overly concerned.

"I like to remind people that in 1978 and '80 we had a different problem, and that's that no one wanted to park downtown," he said. "This is a lot better problem."