Late on a work-day afternoon, Main Street parking is at a premium with a combination of downtown workers and customers of local businesses. Parking space, particularly in the 600 and 700 blocks of Main and St. Joseph streets, tends to fill quickly.

**Premium Parking**

Parking isn’t always convenient for people doing business in downtown Rapid City, and it is often frustrating for visitors. It is complicated by downtown business owners and employees who park in front of their stores and move their vehicles every two hours all day long.

**Sunday Special**

Wanda Lieneman and Nicolay’s complaints aren’t unusual. Joe Kampa, president of United Downtown Association, gets his share of gripes from downtown business owners.

“If you’ve spent $50 at a beauty salon or you’ve had a delay in your doctor’s appointment and then get a $5 parking ticket, it leaves a person with a bad taste,” Kampa said. “When that person finds it’s easier to do business elsewhere, they move.”

See Parking, Page A9

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**Rapid City**

Wanda Lieneman of Gillette, Wyo., often finds she has to go around the block more than once when she goes shopping in downtown Rapid City.

“The one-way streets here make it difficult. You have to drive two or three blocks out of your way to go back to the area where you want to try and park,” Lieneman said.

Parking isn’t always convenient for people doing business in downtown Rapid City.

**Wanda Lieneman**

That doesn’t mean parking doesn’t exist.

Chad Nicolay moved to Rapid City. He believes parking is much more accessible in downtown Sioux Falls.

“It all depends on what time you go out. There have been times when I’ve had to park five blocks away from where I’m going. It’s nice when you can get close if you’re going out to dinner or to a bar,” Nicolay said recently after pulling into a block of empty parking spaces downtown. “It’s congested because the businesses seem to be in a three-block area.”

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**By Diane Rietman, Journal Staff Writer**
Parking: The two-hour shuttle

From Page A1

Unlike other areas of the city, the downtown business district isn’t required to maintain a set number of parking spaces based on the size of the business and the number of employees and customers it can accommodate. Tom Polonic, owner of Black Hills Beauty College, has only 10 parking spaces behind his business for employees. Students are parked farther away, where parking is free and they don’t have to leave every two hours to move the car or put coins in a parking meter.

“If we weren’t in the downtown district, we’d probably need 90 parking spots just for this business,” Polonic said. “That’s the law.”

With about 60 parking spaces available on each block, it is apparent that downtown parking is at a premium.

Councilman Dan Hanss pays $8300 a year or more in parking tickets at his furniture business at the corner of Ninth Street and Main.

“It’s a weekly occurrence to get at least one ticket,” Hanss said.

Although finding convenient parking may be a problem, there is an advantage to owning a downtown business — you don’t have to pay for construction and maintenance of a lot, he said.

“I’ve picked up tickets for customers,” Hanss said. “They may have thrown a quarter in the meter thinking they’d be in for an hour and end up staying longer.”

Perceived problems

“Those who do business downtown want to park near the store. Yet when you drive to the mall, you’ll park near Sears, walk the distance from the lot into the store and then walk the length of the mall to J.C. Penney’s,” Kampa said.

“That’s a lot farther than you’d probably park away from a store downtown.”

Those visiting from other communities are accustomed to walking, Michelle Lintz, executive director of Rapid City Convention Bureau, said.

“I was recently in Boulder, and you can’t drive in part of downtown. We’re parked here in Rapid City because we have access everywhere with our cars, but we’re not accustomed to walking when we can’t park next to a business.”

Aaron Estes said he tries to find a spot where he can leave his car and walk around.

“I’ve never had a real problem with parking in Rapid City. I think it’s a fear of walking by others that’s the problem.”

Estes, a former Rapid City resident who was visiting here early in June, said.

to move their vehicles would be made up by the simple purchase of a monthly parking permit,” he said.

“That’s not taking into effect that they’re taking up a potential customer’s space on the street.”

The Rapid City Journal, which employs about 150 people in its offices at Fifth and Main, has 71 off-street parking spaces that employees pay to use. They are assigned on a first-come, first-served basis, and there is a waiting list for spots. Publisher Bill Masterson Jr. explained that the newspaper co-op does not have Journal spaces are expected to park off the main downtown streets or in paid lots.

“We want our customers — and our neighbors’ customers — to be able to park in front of our businesses,” Masterson said.

Downtown parking is frustrating for visitors.

A businessman with Moriah Ltd. received four tickets on two cars because he didn’t pay attention to the parking permit from Hotel Alex Johnson, where he was staying. The permit specifically states that it is not valid for street or metered parking.

The businessman, who only identified himself as Emmanuel, parked on Sixth Street across from the hotel instead of using the city parking lots at Sixth and St. Joseph streets, where the hotel leases 20 spaces.

“People who are bringing in business shouldn’t be getting parking tickets. They should be allowed to park anywhere they want to,” Emmanuel said. “I’ll pay the tickets, but I’m not happy about it. I’m not aware of the parking regulations or the street signs about parking.”

However, when people check into the hotel, they are provided information about parking, Kampa, the hotel’s sales director, said.

“These are our guests. We want to foster an environment encouraging people to visit and shop here,” Kampa said. “Is parking a huge problem? No, but the issue deserves more discussion.”

Occasionally, the CVB receives complaints from visitors.

“They’re out of town and don’t feel it’s fair to charge them a ticket,” Lintz said.

Parking fines fund expenses

Every quarter in a parking meter and every dollar paid for parking tickets goes toward maintaining downtown parking and covers the salaries of parking-enforcement officers.

Parking fines were raised from $2 to $5 to cover parking ramp construction loan payments. The loan will be repaid by December 2018. More than $500,000 in parking-related revenue was generated in 2006, according to Coleen Schmidt, the city’s assistant finance officer.

• Quarters collected from parking meters totaled $1,186,867.

• Parking fines netted $173,522.

• Leased parking brought in $293,739.

• Fines to have a parking boot removed from a car came to $4,950.

The city earned $58,059 in interest on parking-related revenue.

Rick Booth

Rob Lemme

Joe Kampa

Rick Booth, an employee at Tree Frog’s Trunk, said more parking should be built downtown.

“The limited parking hurts downtown businesses because it’s so easy to park at the mall in comparison,” Booth said. “A lot of people say they don’t get downtown. Parking is the drawback for local residents as well as tourists.”

Rob Lemme, manager of Neighbors Plus, said that although downtown parking has improved in the last few years.
Aaron Estes said he tries to find a spot where he can leave his car and walk around.

"I've never had a real problem with parking in Rapid City. I think it's a fear of walking by others that's the problem," Estes, a former Rapid City resident who was visiting here early in June, said.

Parking standards

Many downtown business owners and employees park in front of their stores, Kampa said. Then they complain to the United Downtown Association about the parking problem.

"It's hard to be sympathetic under those circumstances," he said.

Parking regulations are geared to get employees off the streets and into the lots so free parking is available for customers, Tim Powell of Red Wing Shoes said.

"Nobody wants to see a customer's car ticketed. That's not good for the city, the business or the customer," Powell said. "If we'd get employees parking in city lots, there'd be a 20 to 40 percent increase in on-street parking for customers."

Powell said he would hire an employee using on-street parking during work hours. Like Hanks, Powell will also pay parking tickets of legitimate customers at the store.

"It costs less to pay a $5 ticket than to find a new customer," Powell said.

Even parking-enforcement officers say employees create a lot of the parking problems.

"There are meters in the downtown area where they can park longer, but they prefer to park in front of their businesses," Candy Fleck, a parking-enforcement officer, said. "You'd think they'd want customers to have that parking."

The result is the two-hour shuffle of cars moving from one free parking space to another. That has an adverse effect on the businesses they work for, Dennis Halterman of the St. Joe Street Factory, said.

"The time and productivity lost by employers for employees who leave every two hours to shop here," Kampa said. "Is parking a huge problem? No, but the issue deserves more discussion."

Occasionally, the CVB receives complaints from visitors.

"They're from out of town and don't feel it's fair to charge them a ticket," Lintz said. "Getting people downtown is important to the CVB."

Visitors account for half of the $87 million collected annually in the 2012 Fund. The special half-cent sales tax has been used to pay for new roads, fire stations, pools, ice rink, community centers and library expansion.

Solutions

Powell suggests Rapid City look at a graduated fine similar to one recently implemented in Red Wing, Minn. Under Powell's proposal, the first ticket in a 30-day period is a warning, the second ticket is a $5 fine and the next is $10. The parking violation history of a car could be available in a Palm Pilot for parking-enforcement officers, Powell said.

In Red Wing, the new fines begin in July. After a driver gets more than two tickets in a 30-day period, the new fee kicks in, Ranetta Lang of Red Wing Downtown Main Street, a business group, said. The third ticket would result in a $10 surcharge on top of the original $5 fine, with the surcharge increasing with each subsequent ticket.

"We have employees and business owners who abuse the system now. They choose to pay the fee," Lang said. "We're hoping this will be a deterrent, and they'll start using the parking lots and ramps. It shouldn't affect visitors. If they're here more than three times in a month, they're probably aware of the parking regulations."

Poloncic said customers have suggested extending free parking from two to three hours.

Rapid City's parking ramp, which has 323 spaces, was built to alleviate downtown parking. It didn't necessarily cause it is so easy to park at the mall in comparison," Booth said. "A lot of people say they don't get downtown. Parking is the drawback for local residents as well as tourists.

Rob Lemme, manager of Neugebauer's Fine Jewelry, said that although downtown parking has improved in the seven years since the business moved downtown from the mall, there still are problems.

"When you get visitors from out of town like Edgemont or Hot Springs, they may have lunch and shop. That is limited if you only have a two-hour limit," Lemme said. "They otherwise have to move their car, and that disrupts their visit to town."

There are 314 parking spaces in five city parking lots — some leased and some with meters. Lemme suggested removing meters from the parking lot at Sixth and Main streets and making parking there free for more than two hours. He also suggested building another level to the city's existing parking ramp.

Raven Shott likes Rapid City's downtown area but said it is difficult finding a parking space at mid-day.

"The ramp helped," Shott, a Rapid City resident who was downtown shopping, said. "Perhaps the city should consider more of them."

Other ideas suggested by downtown businessmen include a limited number of extended passes for businesses where appointments exceed two hours. Kampa encouraged more businesses to pay parking tickets for patrons, as well as printing a notation on new parking tickets suggesting drivers ask businesses they have patronized to pay the fine.

Kampa also suggested doubling fines to $10. "The same people are going to shuffle their vehicle every two hours, but they may take the parking restrictions more seriously," he said. "The car shuffling isn't going to stop happening unless employers prohibit it."

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