

What's the answer to RC parking problem?

Delays, indecision cause questions and concern on downtown parking issue

BY LANA BRADSTREAM
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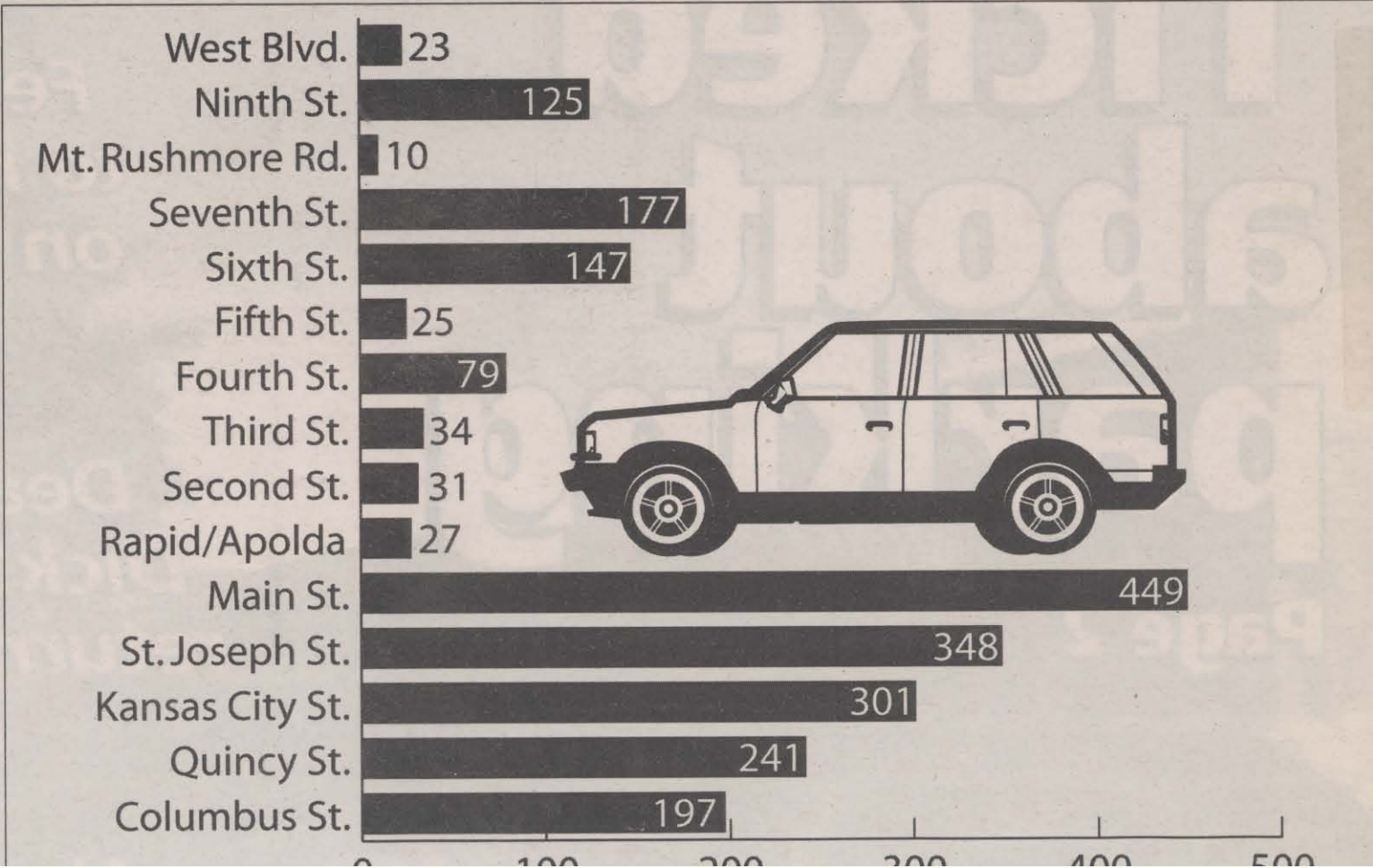
Downtown parking in Rapid City has been a pain and a problem for many years.

Yet, it seems the city does not take adequate action to deal with the issue, many say, including some council members. Parking plans are approved by the Rapid City Council, yet action does not happen or is delayed, critics charge. But it's not as if evil forces are at work.

According to Alderman Bill Okrepkie, chairman of the downtown parking subcommittee, Mayor Alan Hanks and Alderwoman Karen Gundersen Olson, the main issue is money.

"We have to have a revenue source," Olson said. "We need to create a revenue stream for future parking. There is some 2012 money tied up with the Rushmont project and a proposal for metered parking that would allow the city to build additional parking structures over time."

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The city did generate considerable revenue on metered parking and parking tickets last year. According to Lt. James Johns with the Rapid City Police Department Traffic Division, the city made \$250,061.78 in leased parking, \$146,021.97 on ticket violations, \$99,068.53 on street meters, and \$50 on boot fees. Johns said if someone acquires five tickets, the vehicle is "booted," in which a metal device is locked to a tire to prevent the driver from moving the vehicle without paying the past due fines.

That's a total of \$485,202.28.

Despite the large number of ticket issued and the complaints heard around town, parking is not a big problem for the department, Johns said.

"It's a bigger issue for the city overall," he said. "It's not a huge problem for us."

Hanks said there's no good answer as to why the city has not taken action on the matter. "We're working on it," he said. "One of the problems is long-term parking. Another is, where

do the employees park? Another task is to identify areas that require more than two hours of parking."

The subcommittee Okrepkie chairs has met with downtown business owners to discuss the parking problems. However, that meeting was held last fall. And no one is sure when the next meeting to follow up on concerns and suggestions will be held — not even Okrepkie.

Some of the proposals the city has for better parking include the Rushmont Project and a third level on an existing parking ramp. The Rapid City Police Department Traffic Division crafted a proposal on improving parking that called for metered spaces and varied time limits. However, the proposal has yet to

be reviewed by the parking subcommittee.

Business owners say consensus not there

Three downtown business owners feel the third level on the existing parking ramp would really help alleviate the problem.

Larry Blote, 73, co-owner of First Stop Gun, said he suggested building a third level to former mayor Jim Shaw a few years ago. He also thinks building a three-level parking ramp on the vacant lot of Sixth and Main streets would be a great help as well.

"At least Mayor Hanks has the vision to see another level on the current ramp is built,"

Blote said.

He also suggested city vehicles could be parked at the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center and the city employees could be bused to city hall, rather than all the vehicles taking up spaces downtown. According to Blote, the simple answer why it has taken so long for the city to fix the problem is suggestions are not followed up on.

"The answer looks simple enough," Blote said. "Go out for bond and build another third level parking ramp plus put the additional level on the existing ramp."

"We have 17 employees and we insist on off-street parking for them and all businesses should do that," he said. "If an owner or an employee takes up spaces on

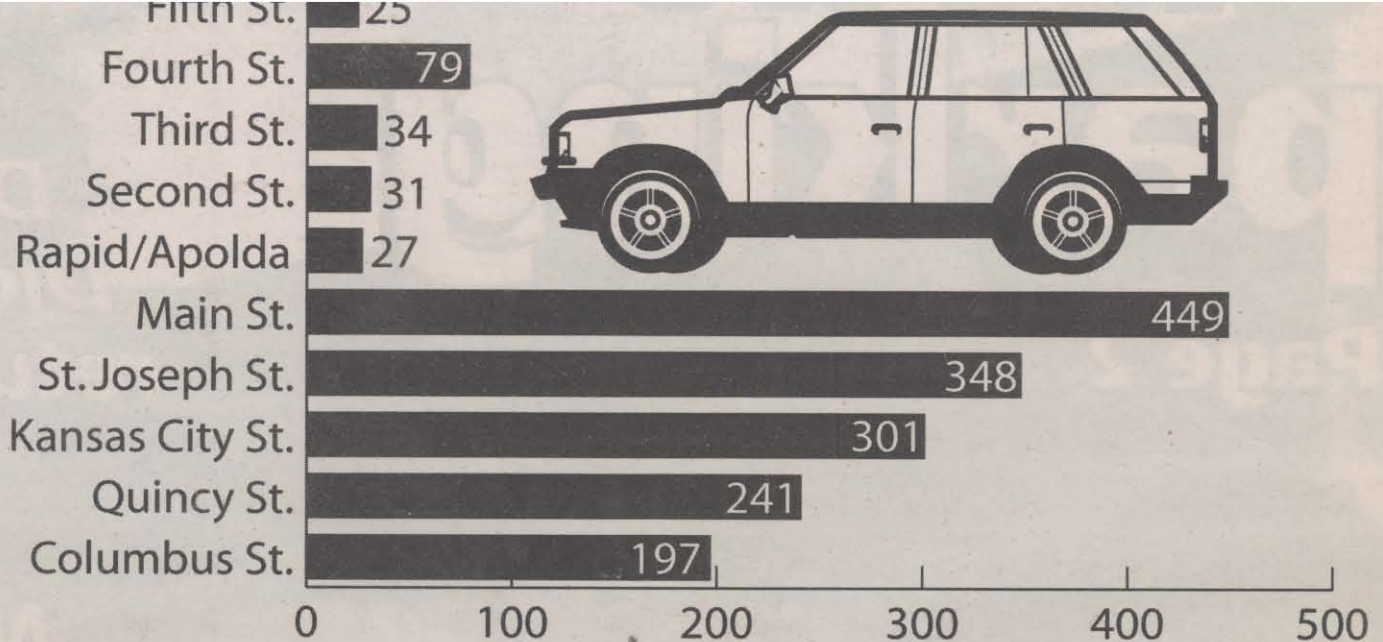
the street, that is less room for potential buyers."

Brian Bade, 66, owner of Storyteller Comics and Games, said while parking is a minor problem for his shop, it is more of a perceived problem than a true terror.

"I hear people talking about it. Everyone wants to park within 30 feet of the store when parking is usually available within half a block or one block," Bade said.

One of the obstacles the city is facing in fixing the problem, he said, is the difficulty in achieving a consensus among downtown business owners.

"There is a problem with the amount of time people are allowed to park in one spot. Individual



Downtown public parking spaces

Total spaces: 2,214

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businesses have different parking needs," Bade said. "What is the appropriate length of time? There is also a matter of funding for parking ramps. If an incentive program was offered to business owners that would help pay for monthly parking for their employees, that would alleviate the situation considerably."

Peter Compton, 54, is the owner of Bully Blends Coffee and Tea Shop. His shop is just outside of the parking problem zone. It's just across the street, but parking is still a problem for his business to some degree, he said.

For example, Compton said he had to get a variance from the city to allow for 15 parking spaces when the required number of spaces is 33, which were unavailable.

After 4 p.m. and on the weekends, he said his customers would be able to park in the ramp, but many people are unaware of that.

"Parking is definitely an issue," Compton said. "Another level on the ramp is a great idea and I am for it enthusiastically. The Rushmont Project is also a great idea, but it got a lot of resistance."

Okrepkie said the most difficult part on the proposal would be getting downtown business owners to agree.

"How do they want to set up parking? Two-hour limits? No limits?" he asked. "Do they want to increase the hours? Do they want meters? There's a lot of wrestling."

"Some people may be happy the way it is and others may not want meters in front of their store. Also, certain businesses dominate parking. People can be there for hours."

A metered approach

The proposed meters would use either a card or change.

"It would allow businesses to give customers cards," Olson said. "It could make close parking more expensive to encourage employees to park farther away. The good thing about metered parking is that it would create a revenue stream for future parking."

The City Council recently directed staff to find a funding source for the third level of the parking ramp. Hanks said the city is looking into the ability to bond to pay for the third level. According to Okrepkie, while it's a good idea, parking is needed more on the west side rather than on the ramp. He is hoping the city will participate in another public/private partnership, such as the Rushmont Project, which would have combined apart-

ments, shops and a parking ramp.

"The Rushmont would be outstanding," Okrepkie said. "I'm hoping Hani (Shafai) can pull it off. It would be another \$50 million downtown. We would get \$9 million worth of parking for the cost of the land and \$2 million."

Okrepkie said he is a strong supporter of the Rushmont Project, which would provide the city with 600 additional parking spaces downtown. However, the project has run into snags. Namely, the city is dragging its feet, according to designer Shafai, CEO of Dream Design Inc, and he is not going to put forward any more money until an agreement between his business and the city comes to be. Until that happens, most activity on the project has been stalled.

"I want to come to an agreement with the city first," Shafai said. "It is not right to proceed with \$2 million in design fees and then the city changes its mind. A person needs to have it in writing and if they don't, it's not good because it creates a lot of issues down the road."

The Rushmont was brought to the city in late 2006 with three other parking proposals. It is a 15-story structure that would not only provide 600 additional parking spaces, but also condominiums and retail and office space. While it sounds like an expensive project, the city would only have to put forward \$2.8 million.

Shafai said he would pay the remaining \$52 million.

"But, I'm not going to spend any more money until agreements are in place, until I know what my duties and expectations are and the city knows what their duties and expectations are and it becomes public," Shafai said.

While he said he felt the mayor and City Attorney Jason Green were slow to move on the issue, he had to give Hanks some room since he has only been in office for eight months. Shafai said he is sure the mayor has other projects and issues to deal with.

Hopefully, the next parking meeting will be soon, according to Okrepkie. It all depends on an agreement when to meet. According to Okrepkie, the mayor has not actively pursued the meeting issue, but he himself had been lax on it as well.

Everyone is waiting for some sort of action to take place. The only question is when will that happen.

According to Olson, parking is a problem in most communities. It's not something Rapid City is alone in dealing with on a regular basis.

"It's like school food," she said. "People think it's not good. It's rarely perfect."