

Council eyes downtown parking lots

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Consider this fairness issue the next time you find yourself circling the downtown, hoping to grab a parking spot.

Should regulations governing downtown employee parking lots be relaxed?

The question is still circling various city committees. Planning Commission members will next honk the horns of this dilemma.

Rapid City regulates parking for downtown businesses differently than for businesses elsewhere.

The difference has its origins in the horse and hay wagon days when downtown buildings were built with hitching posts out front.

Businesses outside the downtown core must build lots of sufficient size to serve their clientele. Lots must conform to rules governing parking stall size, landscaping and exits.

Downtown businesses are not required to provide parking spaces. Patrons grab the closest stall.

When the Rapid City Journal recently added a parking lot for employees behind its building, the city found there were no regulations that governed downtown parking lots when a business chose to build one on its own.

To rectify that oversight, an ordinance change was proposed to require downtown businesses to conform to city rules if they do build a parking lot.

But downtown business owner Tim Powell convinced the council to delay that proposal and refer it to a new downtown parking committee.

The ordinance emerged in an altered form at Wednesday's Legal and Finance Committee meeting. City regulations should apply only to public lots downtown, it now says.

Parking committee members said forcing the regulations onto employee lots behind downtown stores would force more employees' vehicles into crowded parking along city streets.

Regulations on stall size would eliminate about 60 stalls downtown, said Alderman Vess "Babe" Steinburg.

Alderman Tom Johnson asked whether the change would be fair to businesses outside the downtown.

If strip malls around town could calculate their employee parking lots differently, the lot size required of them might be smaller, he said.

Alderman Karen Bulman said she supported the change.

"It will make the downtown more like everybody else but not create a hardship (for downtown businesses)."

Alderman C.C. "Buzz" Knapp said if downtown employees wanted to scratch their own cars parking in small spaces, they should be allowed to do so.

If the city wants to loosen the rules for businesses elsewhere, that was a separate issue, he said.

At this point, the issue was referred back to the Planning Commission for further study.