Downtown merchants are jittery

By Hugh O’Gara
Journal Staff Writer

As the first pavement was chewed up by bulldozers in the $2 million Main Street reconstruction project, jittery downtown business operators met with city officials over their concerns.

Business owners on Thursday discussed their worries about alternative traffic routes now being installed, signs and the possible public perception that the project has closed the downtown area.

“This isn’t going to be pretty, but we’re going to try and make it as painless as possible,” said Larry Kostaneski, manager of the city engineering division. “And the way to do that is to allow the contractor the most time as possible.”

City officials said they were adjusting traffic signals to try and avoid congestion at Mount Rushmore Road and Main Street.

The project contractor, Heavy Constructors Inc. of Rapid City, will install traffic signals at both Mount Rushmore Road and Fifth Street once the final alternative routes are in place, officials said, but it will be a week to 10 days before the signals are up.

It will take six to seven weeks to complete street and utility work at the two intersections, officials said, so those two intersections will be ready when construction starts on the rest of the project in spring.

The contract calls for the company to be out of the downtown area for the Christmas shopping season, Nov. 25-Jan. 6.

Merchants asked the city if different traffic control signs could be used to avoid scaring shoppers away from downtown. But Kostaneski said the signs were designed to federal standards and could not be altered without opening up the city to a possible lawsuit.

However, he said, the city could erect other directional signs to point drivers around the detours.

City officials also addressed concerns that dedicated turning lanes for motorists would cost 13 parking spots merchants could not afford to lose.

Alderman Larry Blote said no decorative nodes should be built at Fifth Street or Mount Rushmore Road because they would slow traffic and eventually have to be removed if future work was done.

He said the present nodes attracted transients, were not maintained and that trees planted in them obstructed business signs.

“It’s one thing to have a beautiful ghost town, and it’s another to have a downtown you can do business in,” Blote said. “I’m of the opinion business comes first.”

The new nodes in the Main Street reconstruction plan are smaller and of different dimensions than the present ones, to allow large vehicles to turn at corners where they will be installed.

Most business operators at Thursday’s meeting said they favored the nodes.

Lee Geiger said the nodes were the “primary source” of compliments on the looks of the downtown and that they were built only after years of public discussion.

Another downtown businessman, James Taylor, said the nodes “made this one of the loveliest cities in the Midwest.”

Downtown nodes to be discussed

People interested in the configuration of the downtown street reconstruction project should plan on attending Monday evening’s Rapid City Common Council meeting.

At a meeting to update downtown business operators on the progress of the project, city officials said the street design at specific intersections and the decorative nodes will be discussed.

Alderman and downtown businessman Larry Blote said he was opposed to more nodes being added downtown, but Alderman Delores Coffing, also at the meeting, said she supported the decorative planters.

Mayor Ed McLaughlin said the nodes would only be discussed at Monday’s meeting and that no action would be taken. Any such “major shift in policy,” McLaughlin said, would require public debate.

The common council meets at 7 p.m. Monday at the City School Administration Center.