Main Street work worries merchants

10 blocks to be ripped up during 1992

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Staff Writer

Plans to tear up Main Street next year from storefront to storefront and from the underground utilities up have some downtown merchants worried about how they will stay in business.

Reconstruction of a 10-block section of Main Street probably will begin in January and is expected to take most of the year.

That project will be followed in 1993 by similar work on St. Joe Street, which runs parallel to Main Street one block south.

Some merchants say months of construction will limit customer access to their stores and may be more than their businesses can stand.

"If they want to find a way to kill downtown in two years, that is the way to do it," Mark Hirsch, owner and general manager of the Bible and Book Store on Main Street, said of the construction plans.

But city officials point out that not all of Main Street will be under construction at one time. And they say care will be taken to minimize the problems caused by the multimillion dollar street project.

"The typical requirement is that access be maintained to businesses during business hours," City Engineering Division Manager Larry Kostaneski said. "That is accomplished by temporary walkways, temporary surfaces or other strategies that are appropriate to the circumstances."

During construction there will be times vehicles will not be able to park in front of some businesses, Kostaneski said.

"The project will be set up so we can get vehicles as close as possible to the business. But the contractor will have to make provisions to get pedestrian traffic to the business."

Main Street from East Boulevard to West Boulevard will get new curb and gutter, surfacing and sidewalk. Existing water mains, water services and a new storm sewer will be built and conduit for future lighting and irrigation installed.

Work will be in stages of two or more blocks at a time, Kostaneski said.

Bids for the project are to be let this fall, with construction beginning as early as possible, preferably in January. Main Street between Fifth Street and Mount Rushmore Road should be done by the end of May. The whole project should be completed by Nov. 1, 1992. Of course, all of that depends on the weather.

"If we have a spring like we are having this year, it may be difficult to meet that schedule," said Kostaneski.

Ward 5 Alderman Larry Blote, who operates a downtown pawn shop, said the main concern for most merchants was scheduling: how much street and sidewalk will be torn up at one time.

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and when the work arrives at their doorsteps.

It is hard enough for merchants to prepare next year's budget without trying to factor in how business may be affected by construction, said Tim Powell of Red Wing Shoe Store.

He and other merchants believe city hall has not done enough to keep them informed about the project.

Powell believes it is retail businesses like his that will suffer the most during construction.

"Where the customer has to come to you, that is where the turmoil is going to be," he said.

Some merchants said they already were thinking about ways to promote their stores to counteract the negative impacts of construction. For instance, Mr. Print will concentrate more on pickup and delivery service, said owner Carroll Pierce.

Others, such as the Bible and Book Store, will work on creative marketing and promote the parking in the back of their store.

"I feel most sorry for businesses on the side streets, because they have the construction two years in a row," Hirsch said.