Shops fill downtown gaps

By Dan Daly
Journal Staff Writer

Vacant storefronts are becoming rare in downtown Rapid City as new shops begin filling in the gaps and merchants spruce up existing businesses.

The newest addition, Andrews’ Hallmark, is set to open by the end of July on St. Joseph Street across from the Hotel Alex Johnson. Downtown business people say that type of business is badly needed downtown because it draws the casual shopper who increasingly goes to malls and shopping centers.

Cindy Andrews, who is opening the new shop, said merchants had missed the Hallmark store that closed last year at Seventh and St. Joseph. The Andrews also have the Baken Park Crown Gallery store. They sold the Hallmark store in the Rushmore Mall in February.

Over on Main Street, a major gap will be filled as early as this fall when furniture retailers Jerry Freed and Ka and Diane Alberts open a store in the vacant Michigan National Bank building at Fifth and Main.

Jerry Freed said they still are working out plans for the 48,000-square-foot former Gambles building. It will, however, be some type of furniture business.

“I think downtown is maturing,” he said, crediting the foresight of city officials who installed pedestrian nodes. The nodes now are shaded by 20-foot locust trees at several downtown intersections.

Parking near the new Freed’s building probably will not be a problem, Freed said, but parking in general will be an issue downtown.

“People don’t seem to mind walking a mile through a mall parking lot,” Freed noted.

In the furniture business, location is not a critical factor. Not many people walk by a furniture store, impulsively stop in and pick up a new couch. Generally they seek out furniture stores with the selection and prices they need.

And if comparison shoppers feel inclined to run up and down Main Street between the new store and Baer’s House of Quality half a block away, that is fine with Freed. That type of business clustering, Freed feels, can be an advantage to the customer and the merchants.

Downtown Rapid City is developing a handful of its own industries. It may not be San Francisco’s Embarcadero or New York’s Wall Street, but it does have what amounts to a small financial district. Everything from banks to brokerage firms to insurance companies have lined up along Eighth Street and St. Joseph.

Downtown also has more than its share of pawnshops — financial institutions of a sort.

James Taylor, a downtown businessman, likes to take that clustering concept a step further. He sees the district as kind of a bohemian enclave where art and literature flourish among historic buildings and trendy shops.

He has gone so far as to publish a brochure, kind of a guide to arts and crafts stores, museums and restaurants that feature music. Other brochures may feature guides to Western history and literature, restaurants, even auto parts stores.

But mostly Taylor has been starting new downtown businesses. A jewelry maker, he came to Rapid City from Los Angeles six years ago to launch Heirloom Black Hills Gold Manufacturing. He has been living in Rapid City full time for about two years.

Wholesale jewelry still accounts for about 90 percent of Taylor’s business. But on the same block is Everybody’s Books, a used bookstore, and the Art Bank, second-floor studio rentals. New additions are the 6th Street Bike Rentals, Everybody’s West and the emerging Center of the Universe Map Shop, inside Everybody’s Books.

Everybody’s West features Western art, jewelry and literature. Taylor displays and sells art on consignment for well-known regional artists. He also buys and sells jewelry and art outright.

The brightly colored bicycles parked outside the bookstore, Taylor hopes, will attract downtown visitors who want to try out the nearby bicycle path.

Taylor has an office across the street in the Elks building, where he keeps track of the various enterprises.

“I’m a downtown advocate,” Taylor said. He sees downtown as the biggest opportunity to expand Rapid City’s retail base since the Rushmore Mall opened in 1978.

He believes a vital downtown would increase property values, create jobs and help boost the entire city. If he sounds like a supporter of the downtown Business Improvement District, he was.

But now Taylor looks back at the December failure of the district as perhaps a blessing in disguise.

“Maybe it was good that the BID failed,” he said. Its existence brought public attention to downtown, and its failure forced downtown merchants to do what needs to be done — for their own interests.