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Council seeks solution to muddy parking lot

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In happier times Rapid City's downtown merchants had visions of downtown parking ramps dancing in their heads. This week all they want for Christmas is a good, quick freeze.

If nature cooperates, a makeshift downtown parking lot could be ready for Christmas shoppers by weekend.

The problem began when a Nov. 8 snowfall halted work on the new city-owned lot on St. Joseph Street, between Fifth and Sixth streets. Then the weather warmed up and moisture seeped into freshly turned dirt, making further work on the lot impossible.

Last week city Public Works Director Leonard Swanson had hoped crews could scrape three inches of mud off the lot, gravel it and pave it. Unfortunately, the moisture had seeped down too far.

Monday night Swanson told the city council and downtown business owners the bad news: The lot might be closed for the Christmas season.

Swanson said that because the soil had been "disturbed" in preparation for asphalt, the water was able to destroy the "molecular cohesion of the soil."

In other words: mud.

Anna Marie Thatcher of the Downtown Association said, "This is our most horrible fear."

Swanson said, "I know I sound like an ogre to some people, but I'm telling you like it is."

Alderman Gale Holbrook told Swanson desperate measures should be taken because the survival of downtown businesses depended on adequate parking.

The solution could be expensive.

Last week Swanson said graveling the lot would cost an extra \$7,000. Monday he said preparing the lot for Christmas could add as much as \$10,000 to its total cost, especially if this year's gravel had to be removed next year.

Holbrook said, "If it's going to cost us \$10,000 we're going to have to bite the bullet. We're going to have to do it."

The council directed Swanson to find the best solution.

Swanson said Tuesday he would try to spread about two inches of gravel on the lot Friday. If the ground is hard enough to hold the gravel the lot could be open for free, all-day parking by Saturday.

But if the ground does not freeze, Swanson said cars would just push

the gravel into the mud, creating a bog.

He said he was concerned that if motorists became stuck they would ask the city to pull them out.

City Attorney Ray Woodsend suggested the city post a sign explaining the risk to motorists.

Swanson said he would close the lot if he thought it was too muddy for cars.

With a good layer of gravel and reasonably cold weather, Swanson said the lot could hold up.

Alderman Vess "Babe" Steinburg said, "I'll tell you what. I never thought I'd vote for freezing weather."

Complicating matters, the city-owned lot at Main and Sixth streets was closed Tuesday and will be closed Wednesday and possibly Thursday while city crews install parking meters.

City Traffic Engineer Sharon Johnson said that although the meters had been ordered about six months ago, no crews had been available until now to install them.

She said the installation would be complete by the end of the week. The meters will be 25 cents for two hours and 50 cents for four hours.