Node project to go on with less controversy

The controversial Rapid City downtown beautification project is ready to enter its second phase and work could start June 1. There are few changes in the second phase, other than a more unified group of downtown business owners.

The Common Council scheduled a special meeting Tuesday to open bids for the estimated $600,000 in improvements. The contract will be awarded later.

The improvements include construction of eight more corner nodules on Main and St. Joseph streets at the intersections of 6th and 7th streets.

The first eight nodules were completed last year amid a rash of controversy from merchants complaining the construction hurt business and from taxpayers saying the money was being wasted.

The first phase disrupted holiday shopping traffic when it was started during the Christmas season.

Merchants favored the schedule for the second phase even though it falls during the busy tourist season, according to Leonard Swanson, City Public Works director. The construction will cause some inconvenience if tourism is up, as forecasters predict, Swanson said.

But, agreements have been reached to minimize those problems, according to Vern Podlasek, president of the Downtown Association.

The contractor can only work on one side of the street, leaving two lanes of traffic open, he said. “The flow of traffic will be much cleaner.”

Landscape Architect Randy Fisher of TSP West said “quite a few provisions” for controlling pedestrian traffic will be in the contract as well.

The new nodes will be nearly identical to the first eight. Some will be smaller, but the overall design won’t change. In the next phase, a directory of the downtown area will be installed.

The nodes are estimated to cost about $400,000 with city urban renewal funds picking up the tab. The first phase cost $465,000. Earlier, city officials said urban renewal money left over when the beautification project is completed will be used for a pedestrian walkway from downtown to the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center.

New traffic lights — adding $200,000 to the project — will also be installed, and another $100,000 to $200,000 will be assessed to property owners for work done on sidewalk basements.

Fisher said if bids come in higher than expected the node planned at the Plummer Piano and Organ corner (7th and St. Joe) could be scrapped. Glenn Plummer argued earlier that he made extensive sidewalk improvements not long ago and did not want to be assessed for more work needed to install the nodes.

But Fisher said overall the downtown merchants have been much more receptive and enthused about completing the project than when the first phase was underway. “Most of the business people are for it,” he said. “They realize it’s creating a catalyst for re-development of the downtown area.”

The bid calls for completion of the second phase within 120 working days.
Eight more corner nodes, directly across the street from those built last year, will soon be sprouting in downtown Rapid City (Staff photo by Don Polovich)