Nodes make downtown mood more pleasant

The second phase of the downtown beautification project is nearing completion in Rapid City with one major difference between it and the first phase of the project — there's been considerably less controversy this time around.

Construction of eight more corner nodes to complement the eight built last year has been going on all summer. And even though the construction took place during a summer tourist season busier than the past two, with a resulting increase in downtown vehicle and pedestrian traffic, most detractors have kept their opinions to themselves.

Aside from having to walk a little farther around a particular corner during construction, or switch lanes to avoid a piece of heavy equipment, there just wasn't that much inconvenience.

Contrast that to the first eight nodes, which drew complaints from downtown merchants about fewer parking spaces and inconvenience to customers during the construction, and from downtown shoppers for those same reasons, plus some thoughts that the money could be better spent elsewhere.

The city spent $465,000 of its federal urban renewal funds on the first eight pedestrian nodes, and will have spent about $485,000 (also with urban renewal funds) on the second eight. That includes new overhead traffic signals, for which the state is paying about half the cost.

The relative lack of fuss surrounding construction of the second eight nodes probably is at least partly due to one simple fact: the nodes indeed enhance, brighten and beautify the downtown Rapid City area.

They soften the former stark concrete look of downtown with their attractive brickwork. The bright green (and well-cared for) trees and bushes add a splash of color for passersby to admire. The convenient benches provide a handy place to rest while shopping or simply to enjoy the passing scene.

Another plus, particularly for elderly and handicapped pedestrians, is that the nodes shorten the distance they must negotiate across the street, thus contributing to their safety.

In short, the nodes make downtown a more pleasant place to be. They complement the storefront beautification work done by some businessmen, and their presence may encourage others to do the same.

It's a project that took its lumps along the way, but looks well worth the time, money and inconvenience now that it's almost done.