Main Street meters won't take pennies anymore

City metered lot next to the Stockgrowers Building has vacant spaces (Staff photos)
Finding a place to park while shopping downtown is a problem for three-fourths of the respondents in a recent RapidPoll.

In fact, past studies have deduced that there is ample parking in the central business district which extends from 3rd Street to West Boulevard and from Rapid Street on the north to the alley south of Quincy.

These same reports, however, found a shortage of off-street parking in the downtown core which extends from Fifth Street to Rushmore Road and from Main to Kansas City Street.

Yet the load factor or occupancy rate ranges from 35 per cent to 25 per cent for most of the off-street parking lots and an estimated 80 per cent on the attendant lot.

And, lowest usage is on the only lot within the core area -- the 56-stall "shoppers" lot at Sixth and St. Joseph.

Even for this lot for the first seven months this year have averaged about 60 per cent occupancy.

Based on 100 per cent occupancy, Tom Cummings, city street engineer, said he figures 60 per cent is about the most that can be expected from a parking facility.

Another factor to be taken into account on the Sixth and St. Joseph lot is that it is a "limbo" parking lot, established especially for the nearby station. Parking is limited to one-two hour stay at the same meter for 25 cents.

This is no bargain because on-street parking is only 20 cents per hour for two hours, or you can use a quarter if you don't have a couple of dimes.

So, workers do not use the Sixth and St. Joseph lot.

Other lots are located at the public library on Quincy, next to the Public Building, and on leased property on Fifth between St. Joseph and Kansas City.

Regrettably, though, since the first of the year, the St. Joseph overlot has an occupancy rate of 34 per cent, the library lot 58 per cent and the leased lot 80 per cent.

And, lowest revenue figures are not valid as a measure of occupancy for many lots because of a lack of records, according to Schmidt, assistant finance officer. "It depends upon when the banks post the revenue. Sometimes we are not posted in the month they were received."

Another factor to be considered is the city council's recent action increasing the rates on parking meters. While there is no way to actually measure usage of on-street meters, other than actual observation eight hours a day, the impression many people have is that meters are now only a temporary measure to find a vacant stall now.

When the rate was doubled on the St. Joseph lot, revenues jumped from $236 in May, to $676 in June and $323 in July. Yet, there is the impression actual occupancy has declined.

As an example, parking lots apparently had made little change in the number of overtime parking tickets being issued. The city council went on a spree this summer to generate money for an increase in the number of tickets issued during the summer, but that reduced the availability of spaces.

"We have had some complaints about the 25 cent bargain rate for the two-hour on-street meters, though," said Schmidt.

Still another factor is "free" parking available on urban renewal property on the north and south sides of Main.

This is in explanation for why it is so difficult to find a parking spot on the street.

Free parking is only temporary because of plans for future building on the street.

But, the city has plans for developing off-street free parking on the immedi-

late north side of Omaha from Fifth Street north to Your Nuts. This will be fairly permanent because it is in the flood plain and is not subject to development.

Incidentally, the lot city council has its eye on for purchase has been recommended in two study reports as well as the Downtown Parking Board. The property at the northeast corner of Sixth and Main was one of several downtown parking sites identified by the Transportation Association interim parking study in 1971 and again in city planning Dept. study report in 1973.

The TIK study in 1971 estimated a cost of about $209,000 to acquire some 150 feet of land and the Public Building just south of the corner of Sixth and Main, to demolish buildings and build an additional 80 parking stalls. The planning study four years ago estimated construction work at about $343,000. The most recent figure is $500,000 just to acquire the land and build it.

Another consideration is the fact Rapid City has no public transportation, which represents the commercial off-street parking industry, believes off-street parking is a must for munic-

palities where private autos are the main form of transportation for employees, customers and busi-

nessmen.

In some cases, says NPA, adequate off-street parking becomes a vital necessity, not an expendable luxury.

There is some question as to the need for additional off-street parking, especially when the two major department stores -- Penneys and Sears -- are planning a new Rushmore Mall shopping center.

But there also is the question of how to use the present parking facilities.

"If we are trying to encourage investment and strengthen the downtown, then we will have these parking facilities ready. We do not have a problem to lose them downtown on the promise of providing parking."

"If the land acquired by the city is not used for parking, the market value remains and probably will appreciate,\" said Schmidt.

"We are past the time of looking at today. We have to look to the future,\" said LaCroix.