Mayor casts deciding vote for nodes

Bob Imrie  
Staff Writer

The second phase of the downtown beautification project — eight more identical corner nodes — is off and running but without a majority of support on the Common Council.

After a lengthy discussion Monday night, the council deadlocked 5 to 5 on a motion to accept the Downtown Association's recommendation that another eight "full scale" nodes be built. Longtime supporter Mayor Art LaCroix cast the deciding vote to forge ahead with the project.

The corner nodes have been embroiled in controversy since the $467,000 first phase started last winter. There were complaints that too many parking spaces were removed, that money was wasted and that the nodes made driving downtown more difficult.

After the first eight were completed this spring, the Downtown Association urged the city to scale down the second phase so nodes were smaller and didn't eliminate more parking. The city agreed. But after architects designed what the group requested, the merchants changed their minds and now feel the full nodes are best.

Some of the council members aren't convinced. Alderman Don Sachs said he talked to at least 50 people and about half "feel uncomfortable driving around the corners."

Alderwoman Norma Thomsen objects because she thinks there are other corners in the downtown area that deserve beautification too, not just in the core area.

"I'm unsettled on it," said Alderman Mike Madden. "I just don't see that many people behind it." Madden said he polled downtown merchants about the next phase and found some opposition. "I didn't get the unanimity of opinion that was expressed by the business group."

At last week's Public Works Subcommittee meeting, leaders of the Downtown Association said a vote of the group's executive committee — about 12 members — was unanimous for building another eight full nodes. Alderman Harold Schmidt said, "Many, many people who have contacted me say we shouldn't go ahead with the project."

The fifth dissenting vote was cast by Alderman Bob Schurger. His objections were linked to an earlier council vote that allowed the corner at Seventh and St. Joe (the Plummer corner) to be exempt from the project. He didn't think the city should go ahead with only 75 of a project.

As before, Glenn Plummer, owner of Plummer Piano and Organ, registered objections. His representative, Mel Scheib, said Plummer cannot afford right now to pay for the improvements needed to accommodate the corner.

Dick Robinson of TSP West, the Rapid City firm designing the nodes, said about $10,000 of work might be needed on Plummer's sidewalk basement. Those costs would be assessed against his property.

"We don't want to give the impression we will tie up the project," Scheib said, "but we can't go along from a financial standpoint."

The council voted 6 to 4 to eliminate Plummer's corner, but a motion to reconsider the vote and allow the corner to be bid as "alternate," work deadlocked at 5 to 5. LaCroix again voted with the pro-project forces.

Because Plummer has done extensive improvement work at the insistence of the city in the past, some members of the council felt that if bids come in lower than engineering estimates the city might be in a position to pick up part of Plummer's bill.

Before the council voted 5 to 5 to accept the Downtown Association's recommendation, LaCroix made a strong sales pitch for continuing the full beautification plans.

"He said he's heard "very few derogatory comments about the (completed) corners" and that the downtown area has made much progress in recent years. With cooperation between the city and the business community, LaCroix said the downtown area "won't be recognizable in 3 to 5 years."

"Things are happening because of what you have done there. You have opened people's eyes to what the potential is in the downtown area."