City to evaluate nodes, gives go-ahead for design of eight more

Bob Imrie
Staff Writer

The downtown beautification project in Rapid City is back on the drawing boards but it had to weather some more harsh criticism to get there.

The common council Monday night gave DSP West, a local engineering firm, the go-ahead to prepare preliminary plans for eight more "scaled down" corner nodules on Main and St. Joe Streets.

And even though proponents of the project, the Downtown Association, want it completed as soon as possible, the council wants no construction contracts signed until the first eight corners nearing completion now are "evaluated." No timetable for that evaluation was spelled out.

The council voted 9 to 1 with Alderman Norma Thomesen dissenting. Reid and Strohl both like the idea but will have at least some of the same features — brick in the sidewalk, some trees and landscaping — so they are "compatible" with the first eight. But they may not stick out into the street or take away more parking spaces.

Unless the project is scaled down drastically and the more complicated features scrapped, it could be a year before additional work is done. Mayor Art LaCroix said. The Downtown Association wants to look at all plans and give advice on construction schedules.

Joe Strohl's biggest plea for stopping the project came from one of the Downtown Association's own members — Glenn Plummer. But his criticism didn't end with just downtown beautification. He blasted the news media for its coverage of the controversy and questioned a recent vote by the Downtown Association.

"I plead with you at this point to not go any further," he said. "I ask you to seriously take a second look.

Plummer said he recently rebuilt sidewalks in front of his store, Plummer Piano and Organ, 623 St. Joe, after getting a "commitment" from the city that the sidewalks wouldn't be torn up. He said to accommodate the store at his corner water mains would have to be moved, which he couldn't afford.

He said additional nodes would create more traffic problems and people don't feel more parking places should be sacrificed. He named several merchants who agree that eight are "OK" but who say the project shouldn't be expanded.

The proposed pedestrian corridor down Sixth Street between downtown and the Elizabeth Plaza Civic Center is a "fantastic" idea, Plummer said.

Downtown Association members told the council's public works committee last Tuesday that the group recently voted 48 to 2 to endorse completion of the beautification efforts with modifications in the final eight nodes.

Plummer said he wasn't invited to the meeting.

Those meetings normally produce "rhetoric," he said. "You can't get downtown merchants to agree on anything. If they could get along, there wouldn't be (shopping) malls."

Building improvements would do more for downtown beautification, Plummer said. "It doesn't matter what you put on the ground."

He called the Stocky Falls downtown project a "joke" despite its beautification mall and said the same thing is happening in Casper, Wyo.

Plummer said he made positive comments about the project in the past that have been "edited" out of TV news stories. He said he was "quoted out of context" by the Rapid City Journal and accused newspapers today of sensationalizing events to sell papers.

Helen Barney, 818 St. James, asked the council to consider the pedestrian corridor and downtown restrooms as replacement beautification projects.

"The city should look into some kind of public lounge and toilet facilities with an attendant," she said.

Ms. Barney cited examples of downtown shoppers who had to ask to use private restrooms. "You would almost think to urinate in Rapid City is a crime," she said.

Myrtle Eich, 3621 Arrowhead, suggested a motorists' group on further construction because the city does not know what the maintenance expense will be on the first eight. She predicted cars will slide into the nodes when streets are icy and said "there's nothing wrong with turning down federal dollars."

Alderman Thomesen who called the nodes "beautiful," moved to impose a one-year work halt to study various statistics, but the motion died for lack of support.

Mayor LaCroix continues to support downtown beautification and said, "I think the council deserves much more credit for accomplishing major downtown improvements in the past six years."

He called the Downtown Association "good, well organized" group that represents the center of the city. He read a letter from a former Rapid City resident who left in 1974 but recently returned and noticed many changes downtown. The man congratulated the city for the improvements.

"I think the downtown area looks just beautiful," said Mildred "Ma" Brown, 330 Philadelphia. She said the city should do everything it can to beautify itself because tourists, for one, notice it. Slower traffic is safer, she added.

Mrs. Brown said there's still people who complain about the Civic Center.

"We will always have disgruntled people, but I don't think they all are," she said.

Alderman Alyce McKay said pedestrians are safer downtown because of the protection the nodes offer.

The city spent $485,000 of federal urban renewal funds on the first phase of the project. It has another $400,000 available. Public Works Director Leonard Swanson said the money will not have to be returned to Washington if the node concept is scrapped.

Dakota Proposition even entered Monday's discussion. Alderman Harold Schmidt said less than 10 percent of Rapid City's voters would favor the project if it were put to the public test. "Dakota Proposition is the only other way unless we stop it," he said. But he voted to continue the project.