

May 10

Not all nodding 'yes' to nodules

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With completion of the downtown beautification project a few weeks away, merchants in the central business district can't agree whether the project should be expanded to another eight corners.

While city officials and several merchants praise the federally-funded redesign of Main, St. Joseph, Sixth and Seventh street corners, others complain that it slows traffic, wastes parking space and actually makes walking downtown more dangerous.

Brablec Construction Inc. workers are aiming for a June completion date for the project, which will extend two street corners at each of the four intersections, providing room for benches, trees, phone booths or drinking fountains, and a shorter walkway for downtown pedestrians.

Architect Dick Robinson of TSP West said the project master plan calls for extending the nodules from all four corners at all four intersections and City Public Works Director Leonard Swanson said the redesign of the remaining eight corners has been added to the municipal capital improvements plan for the next two years.

But downtown businessmen like Roger Metzger are angry that the project has reduced business and may continue to be a problem in the future. He vowed to fight efforts to spend more tax money on street corner redesign.

"It's more of a liability than an asset," said Metzger, owner of World of Wood, 613 St. Joseph St. "The traffic moved more freely the way it was."

Business has dropped about 20 percent at World of Wood because shoppers have to pick their way through ropes, gravel and heavy equipment — if they can find a parking space, said Metzger. Construction gear has taken up parking space and traffic has snarled during the project, said Metzger.

"People don't know when to walk, the cars don't know when to go, it's a mess," he said. Metzger said the \$460,000 used in the project could have been better spent on street repairs across town.

Rapid City's downtown area may flounder as cars avoid the central business district for spacious parking

areas at shopping centers, he said. Metzger said downtown projects in Sioux Falls and Aberdeen restricted car travel and hurt trade in the central business district.

"If you eliminate traffic downtown, you eliminate business," said the store owner.

Glenn Plummer, owner of Plummer Piano & Organ Co., 629 St. Joseph, said the effort to enhance the appearance of the intersections probably won't help the merchants.

"It may be pretty when they finish it, but I can't see it helping retail business in downtown Rapid City," said Plummer.

"What traffic problem?" said Mike Smyth, manager of the Alex Johnson Hotel. "This is a project that is going to improve the appearance of downtown Rapid City for decades to come. The traffic problem will last only a few weeks."

One entrance to the Alex Johnson Hotel restaurant has been blocked, workers have driven graders across the sidewalk and the dust from construction activity swirls by the hotel doors. But it's worth it, said Smyth.

"I've seen these types of projects before. Everybody runs around screaming like chickens with their heads cut off and two years later they've forgotten all about it."

Mayor Art LaCroix said city officials will explore funding possibilities for the remaining eight corners downtown and "there'll have to be a lot of discussion" before the city council acts to expand the project.

He said downtown beautification was a city response to business community complaints about decay in the central business district, which has rotted the core of other cities.

"That doesn't have to happen in Rapid City and I don't think it should," said the mayor. The majority of the downtown businessmen favored the project and "that's what the city council paid attention to."

Howard Oberg, owner of Oberg's Jewelry, 510 Sixth St., said the nodules bring pedestrians too close to traffic and if the project is brought to the remaining eight corners, he'll lose two of the six spaces in front of his store.

More street corner redesign is not necessary, he said. "I think we have enough."