Eight more corner nodes could sprout

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The downtown beautification project in Rapid City is alive and well which could mean the eight corner nodes that have drawn some criticism might be joined by eight more.

The Common Council Public Works Committee voted 7 to 3 Tuesday to leave the project in city's five-year capital improvement program and start plans for construction of eight more nodes.

The capital improvement program lists $500,000 for the remaining work. Council members Harold Schmidt, Mike Madden and Norma Thomes voted against the project.

The full common council will act on the recommendation Monday. City officials would not say how long it might take for plans to be completed, but at least one city group promoting the beautification - the Downtown Association - wants the work done as soon as possible.

The Downtown Association is an organization of about 100 retail merchants and other central business district businesses.

Exact cost for adding eight nodes is uncertain because they may be scaled-down versions of the first eight to save parking spaces. The first phase, scheduled for completion in June, cost $455,000.

Four members of the Downtown Association met with the public works committee Tuesday and supported the project but suggested modifications in site as well as when the construction should take place.

President Vern Podlasek said the Downtown Association wholeheartedly backs the corner nodes as a means of beautifying the downtown area.

The association voted 48 to 2 at two different meetings to ask the common council to finish the project, he said.

"People are happy with what is being completed," he said. "After seeing the nodes, the comments have been all favorable."

Podlasek said the downtown group wants eight more "with the bricks and new modernistic look," but smaller than the first eight.

He said the group hasn't decided when construction should start but said it was "very, very wrong" to start right before the Christmas season as with the original project.

The project originally contained 16 small, park-like areas with benches, trees and water fountains. It was trimmed to eight when some merchants objected to the cost of filling in old sidewalk basements. The basements must be filled in at the property owner's expense before the corner nodes can be built.

Reducing the project to eight corners, four each on St. Joseph and Main streets, solved that problem in all but two corners.

The project is being constructed with Federal Urban Renewal funds. Mayor Art LaCroix said street improvements are needed but the money could not be used for that.

LaCroix said that with scaled-down versions of the original nodes and quite competitive bids from companies needing work there may be enough funds left to build a pedestrian walkway from the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center to downtown.

The first eight nodes have drawn recent criticism. Some people feel the money is being wasted and that the improvements will not rejuvenate downtown business. Others have asked the nodes restrict traffic. Random street polls show that public sentiment is mixed.

One local businessman became perturbed at the criticism the project was drawing and spent $179 for a quarter-page ad in the Journal to outline his feelings. He listed eight of them.

"Nobody was sticking up for the people that were taking the flack," Don Ryikema said about the advertisement. He said city officials have been cooperative with him in the past and he wanted to give them some support.

Ryikema, owner of the historic Buell Building, said the project probably has some flaws, but said it will ultimately help the downtown area. "Anything that constitutes change creates some pessimism," he said.

He added that some people have the "propensity to whine about anything."

"I think the downtown nodes will make downtown a more attractive place to shop. People will like being downtown more which will eventually translate into business."

Not all the criticism has been qualified but it may be toned down somewhat. Rodger Metzger, owner of World of Wood, 613 St. Joseph, was one of the harshest critics several weeks ago.

He said he's still "not really excited" about seeing eight more nodes constructed but, added, "I am glad to see they are doing something."

Metzger admits his criticism upset some fellow downtown merchants and is hesitant to rekindle those feelings.

"The biggest thing that can be done to improve downtown is for some store owners to improve their buildings. But if the beautification project proves to be good, I am all for it. I am open-minded about it."

Metzger said losing parking and the fact some construction workers were reportedly using downtown parking spaces was his biggest "bitch" about the project.

"Overall, maybe it will be nice as long as it doesn't impede traffic. I hope the hell it won't."

A completed node at Main and 7th (Staff photo)