

Group to bring 'downtown to life'

Consultant says city makeover must be about locals first, visitors second

By Scott Aust
Journal staff

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A group of downtown business people are forming a nonprofit organization to put into place changes recommended by tourism consultant Roger Brooks.

More than \$1 million has already been raised toward con-

structing a "fountain plaza," an idea Brooks pitched to civic leaders this spring.

The group, Destination Rapid City has a steering committee consisting of Bryan Vulcan, FourFront Design; Dan Senftner, property owner and businessman; and Steve McCarthy of McCarthy Properties.

"People are in love with downtown plazas. They are enchanted, I guess I would say, with the idea of an iconic type of plaza," city planning commission member John Brewer told the city's downtown revitalization committee last week.

The location of the plaza hasn't been finalized, Brewer said, but

the nonprofit Destination Rapid City is going to help raise money for the project and work on developing a plan that takes into consideration what people will like and what they'll invest in.

Tourism expert Brooks has offered Rapid City a road map for recreating itself and its downtown as the cultural center of the Great

American Road Trip, but he also cautioned it can't be done without buy-in from locals.

"This is about locals first. If your locals won't head downtown, neither will visitors. This is for the people of Rapid City first, visitors second," Brooks said.

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Summer fun

Summer Nights festival may help bring locals and tourists to downtown Rapid City. A2

DOWNTOWN: City may be part of Great American Road Trip.

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Brooks was hired by the Rapid City Convention & Visitors Bureau and local businesses to help the city create a brand identity that sets it apart. After a detailed study, Brooks recommended Rapid City should cement itself in the nation's psyche as the cultural centerpiece of the best "Great American Road Trip" in the nation.

Other recommendations included expanding public art, creating a walking tour and pocket map of the presidential statues and downtown buildings, developing information kiosks that point out where shops are located, narrowing streets where possible and widening sidewalks and creating Wi-Fi zones.

"Bring downtown to life," he said.

Brewer agreed with Brooks that downtown improvements first need to cater to locals.

"It has to be something the locals will love, and something that people from New Jersey that come here for whatever reason will love. And we hope they love it after 6 o'clock because people spend more money after 6 than before 6 o'clock," he said.

One statistic Brooks shared

last week is that 70 percent of all consumer spending happens after 6 p.m.

Brewer said one of the first things Destination Rapid City will be committed to is developing an entertainment district following Brooks' suggested mix of destination retail, dining and entertainment options.

"The second thing we'll do, and the group wanted to start immediately, is the pedestrian bridge across Omaha. That will safely link the civic center, the hotel, bike path and Memorial Park to downtown," Brewer said.

The cost is undetermined at this point, but Brewer said corporation members believe enough potential funding sources exist that the project might be able to be paid for without asking the city for money.

In addition to creating more places to eat, shop and be entertained downtown, Brooks recommended creating several districts downtown, such as an entertainment district and central plaza district.

The plaza would be a gathering place for live music and entertainment built around a large waterfall or water fountain attraction.

The current concept envisions building the plaza on Main Street between Fifth and Sixth streets on the south side of the city parking ramp. The concept features seating for 1,000 people in tiers around a central performance space and

waterfall, which would also have an interactive, smaller water feature for the kids that could be flooded in the winter to create an ice-skating rink.

Shows featuring the big water feature could happen a few times each day, and dining areas could be built on the ground floor of the parking ramp.

Brooks said last week implementing the entire plan, including the fountain plaza concept, could be done within five years. The fountain will need to go through a process of fundraising, property acquisition, design and construction, and that will take some time.

While the fountain concept develops, downtown needs the time for merchants and businesses to get ready. Brooks said if a fountain were in place right now, it might not make a big difference because downtown still needs to build a "critical mass" of retail, dining and entertainment so people will have something to do.

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