

# Let small downtown shops use sidewalks

Yes, downtown Rapid City has atmosphere.

Just 20 years ago, it was a completely different story. The 600 and 700 blocks of Main Street were an impoverished skid row, home to rundown bars, a couple of porn shops and several vacant buildings. Today, it is South Dakota's equivalent to Denver's Larimer Square, sporting trendy boutiques, restaurants and upscale pubs.

A major turning point in this area was when a handful of local investors bought the old fire house and turned it into South Dakota's first brew pub. Soon after that the Prairie Edge building underwent an eye-popping, multimillion-dollar restoration, making it one of the most spectacularly restored buildings in the Upper Midwest.

Next, the owner of the former Woolworth store completely remodeled and modernized the building. Just last year, local investors bought and delightfully restored the Penney Building, a former eyesore that remained vacant for more than 20 years. Today, only a few buildings remain that need to be updated.

I join many other Rapid Citians who applaud the efforts of those downtown property owners and businesses that have invested their capital to improve our downtown Main Street. Our downtown is alive and well because of their investment. Their reward is that many of us are frequenting their places of business and spending our hard-earned cash.

However, it should come as a surprise to no one that not everybody is pleased with downtown's new look. At the heart of a new controversy are the signs, tables, chairs, benches, bike racks and planters that now adorn the sidewalks in front of various restaurants and retailers. A city ordinance prohibits temporary structures from being in any public right-of-way.

Apparently, the complainers are not primarily the customers but the competitors of the offending retailers.

To the credit of Rapid City's Legal and Finance Committee, aldermen voted 5-1 to allow the illegal infringements to remain until Brad Solon of the City Building Inspection Department can meet with downtown business owners, the Rapid City Historic Preservation Commission and the City Beautification Committee to come up with a solution.

The council's pro-small business action showed a genuine concern for those business owners who took

the risk and effort to make the downtown core what it is today.

In Denver's Larimer Square, sidewalk tables, chairs, signs and planters abound. The city has even allowed some businesses to fence in their sidewalk tables. In every case, there is room for people to

pass on the sidewalks. Of course, it becomes crowded at lunchtime and at night, but who really cares? I do not go to Larimer Square or downtown Rapid City to speed-walk but to take in the ambience.

Now, no one would argue that it is important that a sidewalk remains passable. I am sure even the offending retailers would agree it is important that people be able to pass by their places of business.

It would be self-defeating for business owners to block the entire sidewalk in front of their stores. Not only would it restrict the number of people able to

enter their stores (read "decreasing sales"), it would make their potential customers angry (read again, "decreasing sales").

Angry customers can ruin a business owner's afternoon as nothing else can.

I would, therefore, suggest that this issue is self-governing. Strike the ordinance from the books and the marketplace will take care of the rest.

However, I doubt that my more left-leaning friends will totally agree with me on that point. One of those left-leaning friends suggested that the standard be that there must be enough space on the sidewalk to allow a wheelchair to pass. I can buy that, too.

Whatever the solution, it should allow all business owners (not just those located downtown) the freedom to respond to their customer's needs and desires. In the case of this consumer, that means giving me the choice of enjoying my meal outdoors on the sidewalk, passing by the occasional planter filled with flowers, reading about today's special on a sidewalk sign and parking my bike in a bike rack.

Besides, winter will come all too soon.



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