

# Downtown area on the rebound

■ A renovation renaissance is under way in downtown Rapid City, bringing new life to the area.

A renovation renaissance in downtown Rapid City is breathing new life into the city's core. That is quite a change from the 1960s and '70s when Rapid City shared in the country's spread of urban blight. Some downtown buildings went unoccupied for decades.

Spurred in part by the downtown's designation as a National Historic District, buildings and whole blocks are being transformed once again into a thriving business area. Paul Swedlund, chairman of the Rapid City Historic Preservation Commission, said people are starting to take value in Rapid City's frontier history, and downtown is an area where that history is on display. Swedlund notes that Rapid City has many buildings downtown that were built before the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890, which is the date most historians point to as when the frontier era ended and the modern era began.

## **The Journal's view**

Swedlund says there has been a change in attitude towards downtown. When the Harney Hotel (across the street from the old Sweeney Building) was torn down in 1974, no one seemed to mind. But when the Sweeney Building burned down last year, people said, "What a shame we lost that," says Swedlund. "You can't replace the history of a building (like the Sweeney)."

Beginning with the renovation of the Elks Theater, Prairie Edge and Firehouse, the effort to preserve and use the downtown area has spread. Among those leading that effort is businessman Stanford Adelstein. When he bought the old Penneys building in 1996, it had been vacant for nearly 20 years since the retail store moved to Rushmore Mall in 1978. Now almost the entire block on Main Street from Sixth to Seventh Street is filled with shops open for business during the day and at night.

"There was a lack of activity before," says Swedlund, "now you see signs of life at night."

Swedlund is encouraged that the beehive of activity along Main Street is beginning to spread to other downtown areas. He points out the old warehouse district, for instance, with Slumberland Furniture and the Freighthouse, and believes that St. Joe Street is about to boom next.

Through the efforts of Adelstein and other Rapid City businessmen, such as Steve McCarthy and Ray Hillenbrand, the city's downtown area is enjoying a boost that comes not just from a growing and robust economy but also from an improved appearance.