

Committee offers downtown option

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Shouldn't someone do something about those unsightly weeds growing in the cracks of the sidewalks in some areas of Rapid City's otherwise attractive downtown area?

Members of the fledgling "Unified Downtown Committee," an arm of the all-volunteer Downtown Association and the Rapid City Area Chamber of Commerce, have a plan to deal with such problems and concerns facing business owners in downtown Rapid City.

The "committee" concept would have business owners paying — voluntarily — \$200 per year in membership dues. In return, they would receive a free parking space, snow removal, sidewalk sweeping and a newsletter. More importantly, the committee would hire a part-time promotions director and a part-time maintenance person — to take care of, among other duties, those unsightly weeds.

A group of eight to 10 downtown business owners is actively trying to organize the committee and hopes to have 100 businesses join. The membership dues, along with \$7,000 in funds and services from the chamber and an expected \$5,000 from fund-raising events, would support a \$32,000 annual budget to pay the part-time help and to fund promotions.

In the wake of last year's ill-fated business improvement district (BID), which created a lingering rift among downtown merchants, the committee offers a simple and possibly effective alternative. The BID, which was killed in December in a city-wide election, would have been mandatory and involved controversial tax assessments.

The downtown area received some encouraging news earlier this week with the report that United Artists Entertainment plans to restore the 713-seat Elks Theater for use as a theater, possibly to show popular second-run movies for discount prices. The prospect of a movie theater drawing more people to downtown Rapid City is exciting.

An effective Unified Downtown Committee could work toward ensuring those movie-goers and other downtown shoppers have a positive experience.