Downtown leaders moving ahead on proposed plaza

BY TOM LAWRENCE 10.09.08
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John Brewer knows developing downtown Rapid City's infrastructure, public events and business climate won't happen overnight.

But Brewer, the president and CEO of Destination Rapid City, doesn't intend for it to last for a long time, either. He plans to help the city's core area bloom in the next few years and has a plan prepared to make that happen.

John Brewer

"It's like eating an elephant," Brewer said during an interview in his office on the second floor of Prairie Edge. "Take the first bite and keep eating."

Since he took the assignment earlier this year, he's been involved in plans to develop downtown infrastructure, creating a more-people friendly atmosphere and promoting events.

On Wednesday morning, Brewer and others interested in boosting downtown held a workshop with Project for Public Spaces, a New York City-based company than consults and designs parks and public spaces.

The meeting was intended as an early planning tool to develop the plaza. The goal, according to Brewer, is to develop "a place" for the community to gather and to lure the millions of tourists who come to the Black Hills and Mount Rushmore each year.

The tremendous success of Summer Nights on 7th, the concert series that began this summer and will return in 2009, showed the interest people have in downtown — if there is a place to go and things to do, Brewer said.

The workshop at the Hotel Alex Johnson was followed by a press conference as Brewer, Mayor Alan Hanks, who serves on the Destination Rapid City board, and others fielded questions about the future of the proposed plaza in downtown.

The site most frequently mentioned for the plaza is the city-owned parking lot at the corner of Sixth and Main streets. The commercial buildings on that block may also be bought and removed to make room for a large plaza.

"I don't know if that will be the site," Brewer said Friday. "All that's on the table."

So far, Destination Rapid City has pledges of $1.3 million and the promise of more support to develop downtown.

Roger Brooks of Destination Development Inc. brought the idea of a large plaza to the fore during a series of public meetings he held in 2007 and 2008. Brooks is no longer under contract but came back to Rapid City on Sept. 8 — "on his own nickel" — to meet with the DRC board, as well as the Rapid City Area Chamber of Commerce board and the Black Hills, Badlands & Lakes Association.

The Rapid City project is a favorite of his, Brewer said, and he wanted to know that it was moving ahead.

Brooks introduced the idea of an "iconic" plaza with a massive fountain at the center, Brewer said. Other ideas have been discussed as well, he said, but it's time to move ahead.

Locals who are involved would like to see a plaza created within three to five years, Brewer said. If the city donated the parking lot and the other property could be obtained, a plaza could be a reality by 2011 at the earliest.

"We're already moving ahead," he said. "This is the next logical step."

For more on Project for Public Spaces, go to http://www.pps.org.