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# B.I.D. Proposal — Closing the Barn Door After the Horse Has Escaped

by Homer Merfeld

As proposed and conducted, the Business Improvement District (B.I.D.) is an idea the people of Rapid City obviously didn't like. Many saw it as a cheap shot at raising taxes for everyone — after all the "pass it on to the consumer" philosophy so prevalent today would result in nothing more than increased costs to buyers of products and services to pay the assessed tax in the newly proposed district. The voters were asked to approve a new taxing district without seeing any real hard plans except some vague reference to try to entice new business into the area. They want to see some hard facts and plans that point to a reasonable chance for success.

SD has been fighting this problem for the 27 years I have resided here. Hoadley Dean spent a good portion of his life trying to bring business to Rapid City and SD; there were some successes and some setbacks. The Chamber of Commerce has tried a hand at it with similar results. The closest we have come to reality is the Governor's REDI Fund; and there is some feeling that the "baby is being thrown out with the bathwater" in the form of keeping wages

low in SD and profits exiting the state.

We need a B.I.D., but this time it means Business Innovation Downtown! For downtown to stay alive it has to meet the competition head on. Isn't that the American way?

It has been proven again and again in modern America that when a mall corporation moves into an area, it hurts the downtown area — and in some cases kills it. Now that the malls are here in Rapid City, how do we solve the problem of downtown? If malls destroy downtown areas, why not tax malls to solve the problem? It should have been done years ago. Some sort of permit fee or tax to help preserve the downtown area would have been appropriate. We need to keep some of that money in Rapid City and SD. You say they wouldn't have come here then. Does it matter? Will we be able to drive to the outskirts in our gas guzzlers forever? Can the elderly get there conveniently? Are prices cheaper there? The answer is probably No to all four questions.

St. Louis has one solution, but it wasn't cheap nor done overnight. They built a mall downtown! As a college student in the forties, I passed through the railroad station and the surrounding dilapidated areas quite frequently. What a pleasant surprise I had this past summer when I visited the area; nothing short of amazing. The old railroad station houses the mall. They saved a landmark, turned a slum area into a thriving business district and consequently are receiving more taxes from the property. Rapid

City is no St. Louis, but their's is the kind of thinking and action we need here. And the public needs to be in on this brainstorming of the problem, not just the politicians and the business people. If the public isn't behind it, forget it!

Let me digress for a moment. Can you imagine a four block mall in the heart of downtown Rapid City, and right next door to a modern parking ramp? Imagine further a restaurant on top of M-hill; one that rotates 360 degrees every hour. While dining you enjoy the American Indian motif and see all of Rapid City and watch the waterfall cascading all the way back down to Rapid Creek. When you are ready to leave, you catch the monorail (just like Disney World) for the trip "over the hill" or through the gap back to the mall area. Maybe you even take the monorail out to the airport and Ellsworth just for the ride. And you could dream on and on.....

The point is, Rapid City has to get serious about where it wants to go in the future. We can stretch our collective imaginations and come up with a feasible plan. Maybe then the voters will approve a new taxing district, but they have to have a hand in it.

There has to be a reason why people should return to Rapid City after visiting Mt. Rushmore, Crazy Horse, Deadwood and other areas in the Black Hills. And the local population has to want to go downtown for some reason. They all want to leave with a satisfying feeling that they got their money's worth, and they enjoyed the visit.