

Rebuild downtown?



Architects, Chamber,
downtown merchants
combine forces to develop
workable plan

Yet another campaign to revitalize the downtown was launched this week through the combined efforts of the Black Hills Architects Association and the Central Business District Beautification Task Force of the Chamber of Commerce.

To obtain ideas and attitudes from downtown area businessmen, landlords and professional people, the Task Force sponsored two days of informal think-tank sessions in a recently vacated retail location on 7th St. Gathering in an empty building, the likes of which have appeared rather often in recent times downtown, the informal groups discussed the many alternatives that have been proposed to perk up the declining image and growth of the neighborhood.

Participants were also asked to fill out an eight-point questionnaire which will be compiled and forwarded to the Mayor's office, City Council and other appropriate government officials who regulate much of what may or may not be done in the downtown core in light of urban renewal and inclusion of nearly all buildings on the National Register of Historic Places.

Ideas, consensus opinion and disagreements brought out by the discussions were also compiled and forwarded with the questionnaire.

The suggestions made by the architects generally followed restoring much of the core area to reflect on the historic past of the community and to develop a sense of identity with Rapid City residents and visitors that downtown is the "place to go."

Ideas included development of more off street parking, high quality signs directing vehicles and pedestrian traffic, a clear link with the Civic Center and opening the alley between Main and St. Joe into a rear entry shopping mall that would be just as attractive to shoppers as traditional "front door" entrances.

Architects also suggested developing a pedestrian crossing in the mid-600 block of Main and another pedestrian walk over that would cross Omaha Street. Yet another idea from them included constructing a transportation center in the downtown area that would serve as the headquarters for bus lines, taxis, airport limos, intercity buses and rental cars.

Rapid City's Urban Renewal Director Ernie Hansen spoke to the group and reviewed the benefits available now that the downtown core block anchored by

the Alex Johnson Hotel and all streets facing the block are on the National Register. Hansen said property owners can benefit from special income tax incentives for remodeling or repairing historic structures and that low interest loans are also available as well as the possibility of making loans from annual Community Development Block Grant funds.

Hansen added that rehabilitation of the downtown core should give consideration to developing more quality residential apartments above shops and offices that could be used by single people or couples without children who worked downtown.

If the Central Business District is to be revived, Hansen concluded, "we will have to create the kind of environment people like to shop in." Development centered around the historical aspects of downtown could be the "identity" needed for Rapid City's retail core.

Consensus opinion from the first meeting of businessmen and architects held in the morning Sept. 28 resulted in the following ideas:

Creation of a downtown merchants association of some sort that would develop the plan with the assistance of local, rather than out of town consultant, professional help.

Construction of a downtown public rest room and public transportation center.

A test, for perhaps six months, on not using parking meters except to limit downtown parking to no longer than two hours in one spot.

Creation of citywide coordination with traffic patterns and especially how they relate to current and planned street construction.

More promotion of downtown merchants and offerings and creation of a positive "image" for the downtown.

Creation of a deadline, and sticking to it, for whatever proposal is eventually agreed to by those involved.

Construction of some monument, exhibit or facility to link Ellsworth Air Force Base more closely with downtown Rapid City.

Rerouting of tourist traffic away from downtown and offering easy parking and shuttle service for those visitors who wish to shop in the central business district.