

# Downtown needs free parking

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"Rapid City parking tickets increase 63 percent", blared the headline. Never mind that the number provided by the Rapid



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City Police Department turned out to be wrong — it was actually 9.8 percent — the salacious story was out there.

Newspapers from Sioux Falls and Minneapolis to Billings and Denver breathlessly reported the

shocking statistic, passing along to thousands of potential tourists and business people the outrageous-but-erroneous statistic.

It was another public relations setback for our wonderful downtown. Most people agree downtown Rapid City has been in decline since the Rushmore Mall opened 30 years ago. Back then, businesses fled downtown in droves, leaving behind empty buildings and a dismal future. But today the outlook is brighter.

When I served in the mayor's office, the city council and I inaugurated a concerted effort to bring about downtown revitalization. We brought in downtown renewal expert Roger Brooks to help formulate a vision to rejuvenate downtown. That plan is now being manifested, in part, with the construction of the Main Street Square and transformation of an entire adjacent block into new shops and restaurants by businessman Ray Hillenbrand.

But major retailers still avoid downtown and instead locate next to other one another in locations such as the Rushmore Mall and the Rushmore Crossing along I-90, and near Walmart on Lacrosse Street. One reason is the ability to offer a key attraction for shoppers: free unlimited parking.

So does it make sense in this day and age to charge shoppers to park or fine them for staying too long in free spots downtown?

History shows paid on-street parking is an elaborate revenue-producing and cost-shifting scheme that was first implemented around the country in the 1920s, '30s and '40s when automobiles were becoming common in American cities. Back then, downtown was where most business and shopping opportunities were located, so charging for a limited commodity perhaps was OK. Today, the concept is an anachronism in places like Rapid City and should be scrapped.

The city's parking revenue pays for four full-time police parking enforcement officers, and to pay loans taken out to build the parking ramp and to hire private contractors to move snow.

Customers pay for some of the same services at shopping centers but the costs are hidden in slightly higher prices that businesses charge to subsidize free parking. But perception becomes reality in the customer's mind: Shopping centers offer free parking while downtown charges for it.

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City Hall should get out of the parking business entirely. It could turn over all parking operations to a non-profit association funded by revenue from leased parking and perhaps a self-imposed fee from participating downtown businesses. This new group would offer free on-street parking with no meters or tickets.

Downtown parking is within the public right-of-way and in city-owned lots, so appropriate legal agreements would have to be drawn up to allow non-governmental control, and the city would probably have to continue to guarantee the municipal bonds that finance the parking ramp, although the downtown non-profit group would actually make the payments. Business owners, not city government, would be responsible to ensure that employees didn't take all of the prime parking spots intended for customers.

This significant potential improvement in how parking is managed in Rapid City makes sense to many people. Until downtown can offer free parking, it will continue to be at a competitive disadvantage and not flourish like it can and should.

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