Downtown needs free parking / 11/1

"Rapid parking tickets increase 65 percent," shared the headline. Never mind that the number provided by the Rapid City Police Department's parents turned out to be wrong — it was actually 9.5 percent, the sadistic story was out there. Newspapers from Stickney to Minneapolis to Billings and Denver breathed relief.

This laudable effort was part of a shocking statistic, passing along to thousands of potential tourists and business people the outside-reach of our downtown core. It was another public relations setback for our wonderful downtown.

Many people agree downtown Rapid City has been in decline since the Rushmore Mall opened 30 years ago. Back then, businesses flocked downtown in droves, leaving behind row houses and downtown. But today the outlook is brighter.

When I served in the mayor's office, the city council and I put together a concerted effort to help downtown revitalization. We brought in downtown revitalization expert Roger Brown to help formulate a vision to rejuvenate downtown. That plan is now being manifested, in part, with the construction of the Broadway Street Square and transformation of an entire adjacent block into new shops and restaurants.

But major retailers still avoid downtown and instead locate next to one another in localities like the Shops at the Sundance Mall and the Rushmore Crossing along I-90, and near Walmart on Lacrosse Street. One reason is the ability to free unlimited parking.

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

History shows paid parking is an elaborate revenue-producing and cost-shifting scheme that was first implemented around the country in the 1920s, "50s and "60s when automobiles were becoming common in American cities. Back then, downtown was where most business and shoppers were located, so charging for a limited commodity perhaps was OK. Today, the concept is anachronistic in large cities like Rapid City and should be scrapped.

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

Customers pay for the same services of shopping centers but the costs are hidden in slight higher prices that businesses charge or whether free parking. But perception becomes reality in the customer's mind: Shopping centers offer free parking while downtown charge for it. City Hall should get out of the
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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