Consultants say Rapid City must choose future of plaza project

Project for Public Spaces president said he plans to listen to, learn from locals

BY TOM LAWRENCE
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Fred Trent is an old hand at designing public spaces like plazas, parks and cityscapes.

But he doesn’t intend to offer a lot of input into the downtown plaza that’s being planned for Rapid City. It’s up to the people who live and spend time in the city to decide what it will look like, Trent said Oct. 8 after two days spent touring downtown, talking with local residents and holding a four-hour “vision” meeting.

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He said it’s important to listen to people and for them to realize they have worthwhile ideas.

Trent, the president of Project for Public Spaces, said once people decide what they want to do downtown, the plaza design will evolve.

“Form follows function. We need things for people to do,” he said. “You really start with the use. It’s common sense.”

Dan Seftner, the vice president of Destination Rapid City board, said downtown has become a “very viable place” where more retail shops can spring up around a central gathering spot. People want a core area to come to, Seftner said, as sprawl slows and tastes change.

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Kitty Kinsman, a former Rapid City Chamber of Commerce chairwoman who attended the meeting at the Alex Johnson hotel, said the board was “very impressed.”
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Kitty Kinsman, a former Rapid City Chamber of Commerce chairwoman who attended the meeting at the Alex Johnson, said the plaza plan could be in place in six to nine months. Many new businesses could be drawn to downtown, Kinsman said.

"We see a lot of great partners in this," she said.

Dr. Carolyn Fassi Wharton, who also took part in the meeting, said the historic architecture downtown, blended with exciting new creative endeavors such as Art Alley, are also an asset.

Downtown needs more amenities, Fassi Wharton said, such as sidewalk cafes, trees and more public art.

Project for Public Spaces, a New York City-based nonprofit company, has helped build "spaces" across the globe. But Trent said he doesn't intrude on what people want; he helps them discover the answer for themselves.

The company's goal is spelled out on its Web site, http://www.pps.org/ "Our vision is to act as the central hub of the global Placemaking movement, connecting people to ideas, expertise, and partners who share a passion for creating vital places. Since 1975, we have worked in more than 2,000 communities in 26 countries around the world, helping people turn their public spaces into vital community places, with programs, uses, and people-friendly settings that build local value and serve community needs."

PPS was hired by a local resident who chooses to remain anonymous, according to John Brewer, the president and CEO of Destination Rapid City, which is spearheading a reconfiguring of downtown. The firm will spend three to five months preparing a report before a
Design team is put into place.

Brewer said during a two-and-half-hour walk through downtown on Oct. 7, Trent and PPS senior vice president Kathy Madden felt the city-owned parking lot at the corner of Sixth and Main streets was the best location for a plaza. That’s the same conclusion reached by Roger Brooks of Destination Development Inc., who kicked off the effort to revitalize downtown with a study of the city and a series of public meetings.

Brooks called for “branding” Rapid City and finding a way to lure tourists who come to see Mount Rushmore and other Black Hills attractions to the city. He recommended building a large plaza with a fountain at the center that could be used for cooling off in the summer and skating in the winter.

The fountain wasn’t mentioned Oct. 8, Brewer said, but other ideas were put into play during a meeting at the Hotel Alex Johnson that involved 30 people from across the community.

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

Alderman Bill Okrepkie, who took part in the Oct. 8 meeting, said the city would consider turning over or selling the parking lot for the plaza. It’s also possible the city would retain ownership of the land, Okrepkie said.

There are still challenges to overcome, Trent said, pointing to finding a way to connect the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center and Memorial Park with downtown. Tying the two together and getting people across Omaha Street remains a question, he said, and finding a way to slow traffic on St. Joseph and Main streets so people don’t drive past downtown is also an issue to be addressed.

But Trent said he was extremely impressed by the energy and ideas of the people he met and struck by the beauty and potential in Rapid City.

“What’s really remarkable is what you can become,” he said.

Madden said Rapid City has to highlight the many attractive places it has.

“A city that’s worth it is a series of places, good places,” she said.