Community fell in love with ‘something to do’

From left, Rhianon Fast Horse, 10-month-old Kharee White Bull and Mark S. White Bull hang out Aug. 28 in Art Alley during the final Summer Nights on 7th. The Thursday night event drew many people downtown during the summer.

DRAWING CROWDS: Summer Nights shows the power of things to do downtown, a revitalization leader says.

By Scott Aust
Journal staff

This summer’s 12-week Summer Nights on 7th provided a glimpse of what the future may hold for downtown, according to the president of Destination Rapid City.

“The community has fallen in love with having something to do,” John Brewer, president of the group, said about the recently completed inaugural run of the Summer Nights festival.

Destination Rapid City is a newly formed nonprofit corporation leading local efforts to revitalize downtown by making it a destination for eating, shopping and entertainment.

“You didn’t have to go every

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People make their way through the crosswalk Aug. 28 at the final Summer Nights on 7th event.
DOWNTOWN: Plans for street festival have begun for next year.

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Thursday night, but certainly, they have had 2,000 or 3,000 coming, Art Alley's full. Restaurants are full. Shops are staying open on Thursday. We need to get really good at that 365 days a year."

Sandra Schwahn, a spokeswomen for the festival committee, said it is difficult to come up with a firm number, but the best estimates put attendance at about 1,500 people per week, based on the number of wrist bands issued at the beer garden and the number of water fountains filled out by children's parents for some of the activities.

"It exceeded our expectations by quite a lot. We had much higher attendance, and more regular attendance than we initially anticipated," she said. "We were predicting about half that, maybe 700 or 820 a night."

Plans have already begun for next year, Schwahn said, and the goal will be to get more members of the community involved in planning.

The genesis of the festival grew out of an idea from the 2007 class of Leadership Rapid City, a chamber of commerce leadership program.

Kitty Krusman, chairwoman of the Rapid City Area Chamber of Commerce, said the festival committee was formed specifically for holding downtown events.

"Without a doubt, if you talk to anybody, they will say that has transformed not only residents and visitors what's going on downtown, but it's also transformed a lot of business owners' views about whether or not people will come downtown," she said.

Groups such as the chamber of commerce and Destination Rapid City hope to keep the enthusiasm on track for turning downtown into a bustling and vibrant place for locals and tourists to shop, eat and be entertained.

Brewer, who noted 5 million visitors come to the area each year, said an organization like Destination Rapid City can help provide the environment, but it is up to partners in the downtown to step up and make the dream a reality. Right now, the city is "a brand — a brand in other words — that jumps to the top of the mind when people say 'Rapid City.'"

"Branding is work. It's not something everybody has a great idea, you make some key changes with the logo and you're done. You have to gather information, sit around, and you have to find out what other people think you are," Brewer said. "That's your brand. It's not what we think we are. It's what they think we are. That's the work."

After Rapid City's brand is discovered, Destination Rapid City is not to put it on the street. It should be in New Jersey, but it also needs to communicate to neighbors here at home, Brewer said.

In addition to branding, other goals for downtown include creating an entertainment district, an "iconic" fountain plaza and building a pedestrian bridge over Omaha Street. But certain elements include smaller ideas, such as informational kiosks, more benches and trees or even using locals in period costumes to talk about history with tourists looking at the large presidential sculptures.

Funding will be key. Destination Rapid City requested $100,000 from the city in the 2009 budget. Mayor Alan Hanke explained to the city council he included the funding instead of fully funding two other economic development organizations, Black Hills Vision and the economic development partnership, because he thought the downtown group would provide the most impact.

"I thought the most promise was with Destination Rapid City this year because of the momentum that's occurring in our community. There seems to be a lot of excitement," Hans said. "There seems to be an aw

Downtown plans for street festival have begun for next year.

Cooper Smith, 3, gets soaked by a water balloon Aug. 28 at the Bucket Brigade game at Summer Nights on 7th Street event.

A musician who calls himself Woodfin, Monday, left, and Aaron Sanders, right, warm up in Art Alley on Aug. 28 for a performance with the Jolly Ltamos.

"Marketing about moving downtown, but no decisions have been made," Krusman said. "Rapid City is similar to Boise's Capital Development Corporation, and Summer Nights on 7th was patterned after Boise's "Alive after Five" program. Boise also brings in farmers market downtown and averages 12,000 to 14,000 visitors on Saturdays. There have been talks with Black Hills Farmers Market about moving downtown, but no decisions have been made," Krusman said.

Brewer agreed. He noted the corporation's board members all have a strong sense of community history and want to create something future generations can take pride in. "Because we've all been here when the tumbleweeds were blowing down Main Street," he said.

Brewer said the group has a timeline in mind for completing goals, but the best measure will be visibility. Are there more people downtown, more people walking through the doors of shops, restaurants and galleries? Brewer said that even though a good plan is in place, it will require resources to get anything done. And it will require buy-in from the community.

"If the community doesn't like it, there's no sense doing anything down here," Brewer said. "Boise says if the locals support you, come downtown and hang out, don't worry. The visitors will find you. There's five million people who'd like to have found you," he said.