The proposed Memorial Plaza would serve as a community gathering place and as a way to attract tourists to downtown.

Another bronze age

Don Perdue proposing new downtown plaza honoring Founding Fathers

BY TOM LAWRENCE

Don Perdue doesn’t really a history buff, nor is he a big fan of bronze statues. But the man whose fertile brain came up with the plan for the presidential statues that line downtown street corners has another idea: Bronze statues of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Perdue wants to place them in a downtown plaza in a further effort to lure tourists to the heart of Rapid City.

“Because it’s economics. It’s all economics,” he said. “It has side benefits but basically it’s an idea to attract people downtown and have them shop. That’s the biggest thing we’ve got ... our historic governance, Mount Rushmore. Everything comes from there.”

He envisions a recreation of John Trumbull’s famed painting of the Founding Fathers. It would be reproduced in life-size figures of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin and the other signers of the Declaration.

Like the presidential statues, it will be an attraction for the 2.5 million people who come to the Black Hills, Perdue said, since experts claim only about 20% come to Rapid City. He hopes they will be lured downtown by the statues and then shop, eat, drink and spend money.

“This is basically what we’re doing here. We’ll build it, they’ll come and retail will follow,” he said. “Downtown will become a really, really neat walking mall so to speak.”

Perdue doesn’t own a lot of land or buildings downtown. The City of Presidents Museum, which is open in the summer, is his main financial connection. But he feels it’s his duty as a citizen and a...
From Page 2: BRONZE

businessman to promote downtown.

"Because it's the hub of a city and the strength of all wheels is the strength of the hub," he said. "I think it will be the absolutely final phase of our development downtown."

The presidential statue effort has been ongoing for 15 years and will be completed with the unveiling of statues of presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush in two years.

What started out amidst controversy has become a primary attraction. It was also the beginning of the transition of downtown into an arts hub.

"It's just beginning to blossom and grow," Perdue said. "We can't grasp what this will be in 10, 20 years."

Perdue, 77, is the founder of Perdue Woodworks. His son Richard Perdue is now the president.

The senior Perdue focuses his energy on concepts like the City of Presidents and now the Declaration of Independence statues. He admits his family was unsure about the idea when they first revealed it to them.

"They still think I'm crazy," he said with a laugh.

Mayor Alan Hanks said he has heard and seen plans for the plaza and favors creating one downtown. "I think it certainly has some merit to take a look at it," Hanks said. "I think everyone owes his thanks and gratitude for what he's done," Hanks said. "Don is one of those unique individuals, when he sets his mind to it, he gets things done."

The mayor serves on Destination Rapid City's board of directors. He said the city-owned parking lot could be converted into a plaza.

"That is one of the possible locations of a possible plaza area. I'm very excited about it," Hanks said. "That plaza is a big part of downtown."

If people don't like this idea, Perdue welcomes another idea to help boost downtown. "They need to find something that's better for the buck," he said.

As he did with the City of Presidents, Perdue plans to form a nonprofit corporation. He will donate money to the effort, but not as much as he did for the presidential statues, which cost $50,000 apiece.

He plans to use "the same artists plus new ones" to bring this concept into reality. He wants to see Memorial Plaza built at the corner of Sixth and Main streets where a parking lot now is located.

The recreation of the Trumbull paintings calls for 42 bronzes, which would be located at the northwest corner of the plaza. Plaques would explain who they are and the significance of what they did.

A fountain in the center of the plaza would attract people, providing them a cool, pleasant backdrop to sit, eat or chat. A bandshell in the northeast corner would serve as a platform for musicians or other performers.

The area would provide a place for artists to place their work on public display. A memorial wall would be erected to honor veterans.

Perdue envisions a place to honor American history, South Dakota soldiers and boost Rapid City.

But he wants it done in a relatively short time.

"It has to be done quicker — in my mind it's got to be done in five years to start finish," he said.

The same people who helped finance the presidential bronzes have vowed to help, Perdue said.

"Stan Adelstein thinks it's a great idea. Chuck Lien thinks it's a great idea. Everybody I've talked to thinks it's a great idea," he said.

But he said the city and its citizens must buy in as well.

"It is a community thing," Perdue said. "The community has to support it."

If you like the concept, call Perdue at (605) 484-2162. He's seeking input, not financial pledges.

"We don't want anything from anybody because we don't know if the city's going to go for it," he said. "We're offering this as a very viable attraction with minimal cost and upkeep.

"It doesn't have to be done. They don't want to do it, fine. This is not a personal crusade on my part."