Rejecting BID just doesn’t add up

THE ISSUE: Small group of disgruntled people behind push for public vote.

It's hard to believe most of the people who signed petitions to put plans for a downtown Business Improvement District on the ballot knew what they were doing.

On June 29, voters will be asked in a special election whether to proceed with the BID, after opponents gathered more than 3,000 signatures to put the measure on the ballot.

Here's how the BID came about: A majority of downtown business owners agreed to tax themselves to cover nearly half of the cost of a $6.5 million plaza on the corner of Sixth and Main streets in downtown Rapid City.

They're the ones who should be taxed, since they're the ones who stand to gain financially from the project, which will increase neighboring property values and draw more people into the downtown area. More people mean more customers. More customers mean more profits.

Why would voters object to that when they're not being taxed?

It's unfortunate this issue will be put to a city-wide vote when it won't be funded with a city-wide tax. This is not a case of taxation without representation. It's more like over-representation to kill a tax favored by most of the people who would pay it. A few sore losers who couldn't convince them otherwise are trying to pull an end-run by stirring up opposition among voters who actually stand to gain from the plan.

An improved downtown would be an asset to the entire area. All city residents would be free to enjoy it, most of them without putting a penny into the Business Improvement District. The ballot measure was pushed by a handful of disgruntled business owners who don't want to spend a dime to improve Rapid City's downtown, even though a majority of downtown business owners are willing to tax themselves to improve it.

This isn't the first time, and surely it won't be the last, that a few naysayers have tried to derail a forward-thinking project. Remember the howls of protest the Civic Center expansion project drew while still on the drawing board? We suspect many of those who balked at the time parked their behinds in ice arena seats last Tuesday to watch the Rapid City Rush win its first hockey championship.

It couldn't have happened if the Civic Center hadn't been improved. The downtown plaza project isn't much different, though smaller in size. It's a progressive plan that will set the stage for outdoor concerts and festivals, an ice-skating rink, and other forms of free entertainment for the community. Rockefeller Center it's not, but Main Street Square would play a similar role as the core of downtown and a public gathering place.

Why would voters object to that? They enjoy the benefits without being taxed.

It's not as if the BID would create an onerous financial hardship on people who can't afford it. Downtown homeowners are exempt, as are government offices, churches and nonprofit agencies. Even the businesses will be taxed according to size, with no one paying more than $3,000 a year. The large businesses hit with that kind of bill can afford it. One of the ironies here is that the organizer of the petition drive works at a downtown business that would pay a mere $220 a year in BID taxes.

We suspect it cost far more in time and money to organize opposition and hire people to gather petition signatures to put the measure on the ballot ... not to mention the $30,000 cost to hold a special election, though this one may be piggy-backed with a council runoff.

The downtown plaza is something the entire city will enjoy, just as city residents now enjoy the Civic Center. It will bring new life to downtown. Voting down the project certainly won't doom Rapid City to urban decay, but it will heighten the risk of stagnation.

It doesn't seem right that a minority of downtown businesses that don't want to contribute to its cost could undo the hard work of the majority of downtown businesses that share a more progressive vision of downtown's future. They've spent the past year planning, negotiating and compromising to reach this point.

Don't listen to the naysayers. If ever there were a plan that should be a no-brainer for voters, it's this one. The entire city will be able to enjoy the downtown plaza, and unless they own a downtown business, they won't have to pay a dime in BID taxes to pay for it. In other words, they'll be getting something of value provided by others at no charge.

How often does that happen?

We urge voters to ignore those who lack vision by giving the BID a thumbs up on June 29.