Tourism expert urges Rapid City to 'bring downtown to life'

BY TOM LAWRENCE
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"Bring downtown to life!"
That was the advice of Roger Brooks, who has been hired to develop a new "brand" for Rapid City. Brooks spoke to a large crowd at the Best Western Ramkota Hotel Monday night in his second appearance in Rapid City.

He implored the crowd to work together to create a vibrant downtown filled with art, entertainment venues, restaurants and bars. Businesses must stay open later and the downtown area has to be an inviting place for people to spend time and money.

"You've got to make it a hub of activity for Rapid City," Brooks said.

He proposed building a fountain in downtown, perhaps in a plaza area, to encourage more people to come to Rapid City. "People want gathering places," he said. "Water attracts like no other lure. You need to do something that is spectacular."

Last October, Brooks, the CEO of Seattle-based Destination Development, Inc., conducted a workshop on community branding and shared a step-by-step process to develop a winning brand. He recommended capitalizing on the four million visitors who travel through the area each year by establishing a brand to set Rapid City apart from other Black Hills communities. Brooks asked city officials, businesses owners and community members to submit branding ideas and his company received more than 100 submissions.

He shared some of the suggestions during his two-hour presentation. While he praised the area's tourism attractions such as Mount Rushmore and Crazy Horse, he said they take people away from Rapid City.

If and when they come back to the city, they go to their hotel rooms. Not enough venture out to spend money, he said. Studies show most tourist dollars are spent at night, Brooks said.

The new brand can be used to market the city to the 213,000 people who live within 100 miles of Rapid City, the 587,000 who live within 200 miles and the 2.5 million who are just 200 miles away.

But he said Rapid City and the Black Hills are a worldwide destination. The brand can help turn the city into a destination for people across the globe. Once they get here, however, they have to find something unique and interesting.

"You better find the things I can't find anywhere else," Brooks said.

Marketing art and outdoor recreation isn't unique — they are promoted by almost every city in the west, he said.

Rapid City must tie itself tightly to Mount Rushmore, Brooks said. He said a survey indicated 95% of Americans knew of The Shrine of Democracy but 70% don't know what state it's in.

He said Rapid City should trumpet that it's close to Mount Rushmore but offer unique and interesting events and activities to persuade people to come here when they are done with day trips in the Black Hills.

Whatever plan is determined, he said, must have the support of the majority of the people and businesses. "Politics is the killer of any branding effort," Brooks said.

Michelle Lintz, executive director of the Rapid City Convention and Visitors Bureau, said she was somewhat surprised with Brooks' idea for a downtown focused on arts and entertainment. "I was ready for some of it but not the rest of it," Lintz said. "I was surprised by that."

Walter Albasi, co-owner of The Corn Exchange restaurant, was excited by Brooks' presentation. "I think he's right on the money," Albasi said.

City of Presidents founder Don Perdue said he didn't learn much from Brooks. "It's nothing we don't know about," Perdue said. "But sometimes you need a teacher to tell you about what you need to do."

Chris Johnson, owner of The Clock Shop and vice president of the Rapid City Downtown Association, said he felt Brooks can help turn a vision into a reality. "Roger — he's a catalyst," Johnson said. "It's what's been missing."

The CVB, a division of the Rapid City Area Chamber of Commerce, brought Brooks here. His $52,000 fee is being paid by a combination of public and private dollars.

Lintz said the new brand is to be unveiled in late March but it may be released sooner. Lintz and others at the meeting said they had heard similar ideas in the past. The difference this time will be to make it happen.

"Let's get to it," said Alderwoman Karen Gunderson Olsen.