Watch revitalization happen downtown

By Emilie Rusch
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Rapid City residents may not have noticed any monumental change to downtown in 2009, the first full year of revitalization efforts, but advocates say 2010 will be a very different story.

Construction is scheduled to begin in 2010 on Main Street Square, the year-round public plaza at the heart of downtown efforts, along with the multiuse parking development at Sixth and St. Joseph streets and the complete reconstruction and beautification of Sixth Street.

The downtown Business Improvement District — a funding mechanism for plaza operations and other project — was approved last week, and Summer Nights will celebrate its third year with changes organizers hope will prepare the street festival for continued growth.

"2010, that's when people are going to start to see real progress that's visible to the average visitor to downtown Rapid City," Mayor Alan Hanks said. "As there is more and more excitement and more and more redevelopment, more and more people want to come downtown."

In 2009, the third level of the city's parking garage opened, making available 160 more spaces to the public. More sidewalk cafes spilled out from restaurants throughout downtown. The new owners of the Alex Johnson unveiled their plans for renovation, and the Windsor Block restoration at the corner of St. Joseph and Seventh streets was completed.

The city licensed its first sidewalk vendors, and Destination Rapid City installed information kiosks near busy pedestrian intersections. Four more presidential statues, including Abraham Lincoln, also found homes on downtown corners.

"These things are starting the ball rolling," said Dan Senftner, president of Destination Rapid City.

Summer Nights celebrated its second year with increased attendance, drawing between 3,000 and 4,000 patrons to Seventh Street every week.

"The estimates are that our attendance more than doubled from the first year," said Sandy Schwan, president of Summer Nights' board of directors. "The last week in 2009, the attendees barely fit in the entertainment area."

The festival started the summer split between Sixth and Seventh streets, but halfway through the season, organizers moved the children's activities to Seventh Street north of Main Street to provide a more cohesive experience.

For 2010, organizers think they've come up with a permanent layout that will allow for future growth — a stage at Seventh and Main streets, with children's events south of St. Joseph Street.

Curt Small, owner of the Elks Theatre and vice president of the Rapid City Downtown Association, said Summer Nights is proving it can draw customers to downtown businesses, if not on Thursday nights, the other six days of the week.

"It showed that it was going to be a continued success and not a one-year wonder," Small said. "We had several people come in and say they didn't even know downtown had a theater. It's just creating that familiarity of coming downtown where a lot of people don't have that."

Destination Rapid City officials also spent 2009 talking to as many business and property owners as they could about their vision for downtown and the proposed BID. The downtown association now boasts 160 members, up from 30 in October 2008, and by the Feb. 22 hearing on the tax district, Destination had garnered support from 67.4 percent of all assessable front footage downtown, Senftner said.

"There was a lot of communication. That's a huge accomplishment in itself — opening a door to communication from one business to another, bringing people together," Senftner said. "If you want to talk about one thing, it's opening the lines of communication to a central area."

Even those folks not entirely sold on the Main Street Square see the ongoing, community-wide conversation as a good thing.

"That's a good debate to have — what's good and what's better," said economist Don Frankenfeld, who rents an office downtown.

"There are a lot of people engaged now in making like that. I think that's Rapid City a better place. I good."