Petition filed to put BID on ballot

OPPONENTS: Group against special tax district turned in 3,503 signatures to put issue to a public vote.

By Barbara Soderlin 05.01.10
Journal staff

Opponents of the downtown Business Improvement District turned in more than enough signatures Friday afternoon to get the new city council-approved taxing district referred to a citywide public vote.

The 3,503 signatures collected are nearly 70 percent more than the 2,070 it was estimated they needed to force a vote on the issue. The city council has 10 days from the time the petitions were turned in to set a date for a special election, since it is too late to get the item on the June 8 ballot.

Some signatures may be thrown out because they aren't properly filled in or the people signing aren't registered voters in the city.

City officials, who counted the signatures, said it will be up to challengers to the petitions to check whether the people who signed are registered voters. The staff will throw out any signatures where the person's name and information are not correctly filled in. That work was expected to be completed Monday.

Any challenger to the petition would have until the end of the day to file a notice of their challenge.

What's next
The Rapid City Council has 10 days from the time the petitions were turned in to set a date for a special election. It is too late to place the Business Improvement District referendum on the June 8 ballot.

BID: Opponents hired professional signature gatherer.

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Friday to inspect the petitions and verify that signatures are from registered voters, city finance officer Jim Preston said.

Those who spearheaded the petition drive said they were thankful for the support they received and believe they have more than enough valid signatures. They walked door to door downtown, called property owners and stood outside public places like the post office and county courthouse to gather signatures. The opponents hired a professional signature gatherer, who brought in about 1,000 signatures.

"People are paying attention to this issue, and they do not think it's fiscally responsible to spend this kind of money," said Julie Mueller.

The BID would charge an extra tax on downtown property, which would generate about $173,700 a year in revenue and go to support maintenance and programming at the proposed Main Street Square public plaza. The $6.5 million cost of building the park would be paid by private donors and sales taxes collected in the city's Vision 2012 fund.

The district would be divided into two zones, with businesses in Zone 1 paying $1.50 per $1,000 assessed value and businesses in Zone 2 paying $0.75 per $1,000 assessed value. Zone 1 would include all properties bordered by Mount Rushmore Road, Omaha Street, Fifth Street and Kansas City Street. Zone 2 includes all commercial properties outside those boundaries between West Boulevard, Columbus Street and East Boulevard.

There would be a $3,000 annual cap on total taxes paid on one piece of property. That cap is one sticking point for the opponents, who say it places an unfair burden on the owners of lesser-valued properties.

"I think people are upset about government spending, and I think they recognize an unfair tax when they see them," said opponent Mary Renka, office manager at Black Hills Psychiatry Associates.

The plaza has been championed by the Destination Rapid City downtown economic development group, which plans to inspect the signatures next week and will check the names against the list of registered voters in the county auditor's office, said Beth Hottel, director of marketing and membership.

"We don't know how many of those are actually registered voters," she said.