Inappropriate for downtown

Those who see the new storefront sign that Video Blue put up Thursday may wonder at the appropriateness of displaying what appears to be the nude lower body of a woman on Rapid City's Main Street. Others may wonder if the sign fits in with the overall character of the city's historic downtown business district. Still others may wonder if the sign itself is obscene or pornographic.

When any shop owner opens up for business, one of the first things he must do is let potential customers know what might be found inside. Signs are an essential, if not vital, part of advertising a business. In any aspect of operating a business, signs are regulated by the city through ordinances and an office that reviews signs. In other words, "anything goes" is not the rule with signs in Rapid City.

An owner who wants to put up a sign to advertise his business must first make an application with the city's Building Inspection Department. The sign must meet standards specified in the city's sign ordinance, one of which is that the sign may not contain "words or pictures which the store is not legally permitted to sell." Brad Solon, with the department, points out that what is "obscene or pornographic" is not specified in city ordinances. The department approved the Video Blue sign.

Obstructiveness is something that communities have wrestled with for ages. Naturally, courts have been asked to define what is obstructive to help city and state regulators judge what is obstructive. The U.S. Supreme Court formulated guidelines for determining obscenity in Miller vs. California (1973). The first provision defines obscenity by "whether the average person, applying contemporary community standards would find that the work taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest.

Pictured above is Video Blue's new sign on Main Street. The reader is invited to decide whether our "community standards" are such that this sign meets the court's standards. It is in the owner's interest to respect community standards and fit in with the downtown business district. The owner says the sign is not inappropriate and does not conflict with the downtown area. "I don't think we've done anything wrong."

Video Blue's customers would be able to find the business without the sign or with a more subdued storefront that is in keeping with the historic downtown district in which the store is located. It is in the owner's interest to respect community standards and fit in with the downtown business district. The store owners shouldn't flaunt our community standards by displaying a sign that appeals so flagrantly to prurient interest.

So please, take down your sign.