Downtown: Brainstorm session

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There's something happening here. There just needs to be patience and perseverance. I see the results that are possible but not visible yet."

It's only part of the work already under way to get people into the downtown area. Revitalizing downtown Rapid City was the focus of a roundtable discussion last week that involved downtown business owners, city officials and those interested in the future of downtown.

Last week's brainstorming session started with an earlier meeting involving people interested in the community but who don't have a business or other ties to the downtown area. They do, however, see a potential for the downtown community.

Among them is Dan Peteriet, a doctor with the John Vucurevich Cancer Care Institute.

"We'd really like to see the downtown revamped and be a thriving community," Peteriet said. "Salt Lake City and Santa Fe are models where they've brought in someone who has done a lot of this type of work. It's not just the downtown businesses who would like to see the improvements."

A lot of ideas were exchanged - some good and some bad.

To make it happen, it takes people - living, working and shopping in the downtown area. Rapid City Mayor Jim Shaw said. He certainly knows from experience after owning Prince and Fauper Book Store in downtown for several years. He has seen examples where life downtown ends with the evening commute.

"I was in Kansas City a few years ago, and a lot of cars and activity took place Monday through Friday until 4:30 p.m. Then, it became a ghost town. They all drove away to the suburbs," Shaw said. "Our focus and downtown are unique. We don't want to roll up the carpet at the end of the day. We want people to still come down and shop or dine in the downtown area."

Don Purdue is a longtime resident of Rapid City. He believes there needs to be a way to tie art and history together into a formula for economic development in the downtown area. His vision - the City of Presidents - will eventually have all the American presidents gracing the street corners of downtown Rapid City. The cost of the statues is paid entirely from private donations and is done by local artists.

And a day doesn't go by without seeing small groups of tourists photographed next to one of the presidential symbols.

Why do this?

"It gets people out of their cars and on the sidewalks. As they walk from one statue to another, they may look in a store window, perhaps stop to go inside to see what's available," Purdue said. "Something clever may happen - people may buy something."

One of the problems of getting people downtown is dealing with traffic and parking - an issue debated intensely by the group. Gary Brown, a member of the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center board, said they face it all the time when it comes to moving people in and out of the civic center during the Black Hills Home Show and Black Hills Rodeo and Stock Show.

"We've dealt with access to a lot of parking here. It's a matter of getting the people from one place to another," Brown said. "Look at Deadwood. They provide access for locals and visitors from parking lots to attractions."

Although a monorail system would be ideal, a more realistic solution would be a trolley system that could travel down Mount Rushmore Road from the large lots at the civic center and down St. Joseph and Main Streets and over to the Journey Museum. Now, there's a way to tie the main attractions of the downtown with the large empty parking areas, providing a solution to two problems.

A bold new initiative to promote downtown is a great idea, Dennis Halterman of St. Joe Street Factory said.

"I think the downtown is a semi-polished jewel, just waiting to be polished up to a gleaming brilliance," Halterman said. "I would like to see some kind of grand-scale plan put into play that the entire community could get behind."

A handful of people can get things going, but it will take a community effort for all the changes to take place. The hope is that there's more than just a lot of talk about the future of Rapid City's downtown.

Halterman considers the downtown area the heart of the city. When the walls of varying sizes moved in, Rapid City's downtown became a bit weaker, but it didn't die. Now's the time to make it the focus of the community again, he said.

"Rapid City has a vibrant downtown," Halterman said. "We just want to make it better."

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