New group sees unity downtown

By Dan Daly
Journal Staff Writer

You'd think something like the annual Crazy Daze pingpong ball drop would be fairly easy to organize.

Buy 200 pingpong balls, take them around to local merchants, get them to donate prizes and put their names on the balls, collect the balls and drop them from the roof of Hotel Alex Johnson.

But if you're trying to run a business and do the legwork in your spare time, it becomes a chore. Add trash pickup, sidewalk sweeping, the St. Patrick's Day parade, dealings with city hall, and Christmas, and the current, all-volunteer Downtown Association finds itself strapped for time and money.

Last year's ill-fated business improvement district (BID), a quasi-government taxing authority, proved too unpopular. Now the Rapid City Area Chamber of Commerce and a group of downtown business owners have teamed up to form a "Unified Downtown Committee," an arm of the Downtown Association.

The chamber, in a recent letter, said it had been asked by several downtown business owners to help form a chamber committee as "an interim solution" to problems of parking, street work and other downtown issues.

Business owners will be asked to pay $200 a year. With dues from 100 members, $7,000 in funds and services from the chamber and $5,000 raised during the year, organizers hope to have a $32,000 annual budget.

The money will be used to hire a also fund $12,000 in promotions such as Crazy Daze, Artoberfest and Christmas events, said the chamber.

And members get a free parking space, snow removal, sidewalk sweeping and a newsletter.

Tim Powell of Red Wing Shoes has been designated chairman of the group. Letters went out last week, he said, and the initial response from businesses was good.

He said eight to 10 business people, nearly all from small retail stores, had been actively trying to organize the committee. The committee is meant to replace the voluntary — and mostly penniless — group formed in the wake of the BID's failure.

The BID, launched a year ago and killed in a December citywide election, created a lingering rift among downtown merchants.

"It is really a fence-mending group," Powell said. Organizers were both BID supporters and opponents, and they hope most businesses downtown will join.

Powell said this group would be more like the North Rapid Civic Association than the BID. Business people will pool their resources to make Rapid City's main business district more attractive and prosperous.

"We're not trying to change the world, just improve a little niche of it," Powell said.

The mandatory nature of the BID was a main sticking point last year. Powell said the volunteer group would be more palatable to many merchants.

Although business owners can join any time, Powell said the chamber's fiscal year begins Sept. 1. "We would