Anti-BID member accepted vote extension

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A man whose comments were used in a letter attacking a straw vote on the downtown Rapid City Business Improvement District earlier had sworn the vote was proper.

The letter, written by members of an anti-BID group called the Committee for Fairness, said “documented begging took place” during the straw vote in March. Pro-BID people have denied the charge.

Randy Hildebrant, a member of the committee that counted and certified votes cast in the straw ballot, supplied information used in the letter.

The letter charged pro-BID forces who controlled the straw vote decided to accept ballots that came in the mail the morning after the voting deadline had passed. However, Hildebrant, now a BID opponent, said at the time he agreed to extend the deadline.

“At the time I was in the middle of it, and it seemed the proper thing to do,” he said.

But he said it was the Committee for Fairness, not him, who decided to call the election rigged in the anti-BID letter.

“It may not have been rigged, but it was stretching the boundaries,” Hildebrant said.

John Brewer, chairman of the Downtown Development Commission, the board elected to administer the BID, called the anti-BID letter “crazy” and said the only part of it that was accurate was the part that quoted him as saying the straw vote had been a stunning victory for the BID.

Brewer said if Hildebrant questioned the way the election had been conducted, he should not have signed the affidavit certifying the ballot.

The election results also were reviewed by the mayor and two aldermen, Brewer said.

As for Hildebrant saying he did not call the election rigged, Brewer said: “He had better be backpedaling. Where did the word ‘rigged’ come from? If Mr. Hildebrant didn’t say it, who did?”

Jack Brand said the Committee for Fairness believed the straw ballot was rigged. He said the committee was roughly the same group that circulated petitions to bring the BID to a vote, and included Brand, Richard Hoff, Jim Kurtz, Larry Blote and Bruce Meister.

Brand said the committee wrote its anti-BID letter (which he said he researched) after talking to Hildebrant and others. He would not name the others.

How could someone who earlier swore the election was proper now say it was not?

“I don’t know. I didn’t sign and certify that it was right,” Brand said. “The rumors have been flying since the vote that was taken that something was wrong and I guess we put it down on paper.”

Hildebrant, who started out against the BID, then supported it and now opposes it again, served on a four-member committee that counted ballots in the straw vote. The vote was taken to determine whether downtown businesses, property owners and others who would pay the BID tax supported the BID. The vote was 138 for and 128 against the BID.

Hildebrant said the deadline for ballots was supposed to have been 5:30 p.m. March 27. But he said he and other election committee members and others, including Brewer, decided to wait and include ballots that came in the next morning’s mail.

He said the BID would have failed by one vote had balloting been cut off at 5:30 p.m. Hildebrant said the BID straw vote committee and others “rationalized” that it was correct to accept more ballots and that he then wanted to see the BID go ahead.

Paul Strassels, who also was on the straw ballot committee, said the committee had said all along it would accept mailed ballots because some people who were voting lived out of town.

Brewer and other pro-BID people say the anti-BID letter is unfair. They say they want to know why the members of the Committee for Fairness did not sign their names to it.

They say the letter is unsubstantiated and untrue and could damage their reputations.

Rapid City voters will go to the polls Dec. 4 to say whether the BID should be repealed.