Supporters of a downtown Rapid City Business Improvement District rigged a straw vote that showed most people downtown favored the BID, according to Jack Brand, one of the people working to defeat the BID.

Paul Strassels, a member of the committee that counted the votes in the straw ballot, denied the charges.

Strassels’ charges are part of a letter from the anti-BID “Committee for Fairness.” Brand said the letter was mailed to people who signed the petition to bring the BID to a citywide vote. An election will be Dec. 4 on whether to repeal the BID.

Brand charges that the BID actually failed by one vote in the straw ballot, but that the BID election committee and several other pro-BID people decided not to tell anyone until “sometime later.”

“An animated discussion then supposedly took place, the end result being that they would wait until the next day and see if any more ballots showed up in the mail,” according to the letter.

“Well, wouldn’t you just know it. The next afternoon, Mr. Schnell (Bryan Schnell, then director of the pro-BID Downtown Development Commission) shows up with an additional 20 ballots that he had supposedly received in the mail, and of course they were all in favor of the BID,” the letter says.

The letter goes on to say that an anti-BID election committee member, Randy Hildebrant, also submitted 10 ballots against the BID that had been mailed to him.

The final tally was 138 favoring the BID, and 128 against it.

Brand said accepting mailed ballots was changing the rules of the election. But Strassels said the election committee had said from the beginning that it would take ballots through the mail because some of the downtown property owners lived out of town.

“There is nothing untoward going on here. I think what really upsets the people is they lost,” Strassels said.

He denied the letter’s assertion that “documented rigging took place.”

“There was not, and I take extreme exception to the statement that there was anything wrong that was done,” he said.

The anti-BID letter also asks: “Why did Mr. Schnell place phone calls to pro-BID people urging them to vote when they saw they were in trouble, and how much of this did he do after 7 p.m. after the votes had been counted and showed that BID had been defeated?”

Schnell said the statements about him were false.

“I think he should have thought before he put my name on something that is untrue,” Schnell said.

The BID taxes downtown property owners with the money earmarked for downtown improvements.

Clarification
A story in Wednesday’s Rapid City Journal said Business Improvement District (BID) taxes collected from downtown Rapid City property owners were earmarked for downtown improvements. Building owners pay the tax when their buildings are unoccupied. In other cases, the occupants of the buildings pay the tax.