Time to put BID bitterness behind

It’s time to put all the rancor and bickering over Rapid City’s downtown Business Improvement District behind us. It’s time to get on with making downtown a more vital, prosperous place.

Tuesday a circuit court judge ruled that the referendum election that BID opponents had sought for next Tuesday could not be held. Those seeking a city-wide vote had failed to gather sufficient valid signatures on petitions. The election, if held, would not have been legal. Since the election is not being held, the BID — which already has been approved by the Rapid City Common Council, as required by law — goes into effect.

The BID is designed to create a structure and raise money for improving downtown Rapid City. The revenue comes from downtown businesses, not from city taxpayers at large. It is appropriate that the money earmarked for helping one section of the city be contributed only by those who will benefit.

It is also appropriate that those who pay the bill are the ones responsible for deciding whether BID should be created and how it should operate. That’s the way the BID evolved.

When the idea was first broached, many downtown businesses objected that they hadn’t been consulted. So those who initiated the concept backed up and said, “Fine. If you don’t like our proposal, what do you suggest?” A new more representative committee was formed, meetings were held, and the BID proposal was refined. A non-binding election was even held among affected businesses on a one-business, one-vote basis.

Opponents of the BID have made much of the fact that “only” 78 percent of those eligible to vote actually cast ballots in that opinion sample. They say that because more than 50 percent of those who could have voted did not approve, the majority did not prevail.

That’s not the way elections work. By that backhanded logic, George Bush is not the president of the United States, because a majority of those eligible to vote didn’t favor Bush. Reality — and fairness — dictate that the winner is the one who receives the majority of votes that were cast.

In any event, the BID was legally and carefully constructed with the thoughtful approval of the city council. Its purpose is not to strangle downtown businesses, but to enhance development and foster improvement. Its purpose is not to divide, but to unify.

Unfortunately, through the painful birthing process that has not been true.

Downtown needs to improve and grow strong, or stagnate and waste away. Many fought the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center initially, but experience has proven the wisdom and benefits of proceeding. If fortune similarly smiles on downtown, in a decade we’ll wonder what all the fuss was about.

Now it’s time to put animosity behind us. The BID is not perfect. It is needed. And it’s a better proposal than any other that has been brought forth.