Elks closing has message for '90s

New Year's Eve in Rapid City this year will be marked by a sad but valuable reminder about what it will take to succeed in the 1990s. Sunday night is the final night to see a movie on the big screen at the Elks Theater downtown. United Artists announced this week it would close the 77-year-old, 713-seat theater. The chain's multiple theaters at the Rushmore Mall and Northgate shopping center are simply more profitable.

Indeed, the smaller "multiplex" theaters, such as the Carmike Theaters here, make business sense. With a bunch of movies at one location, ticket takers and purveyors of popcorn can operate more efficiently. One unpopular movie cannot ruin the night at an octoplex. And movie goers get more choices.

Still, it's sad. The big screen, the balcony, the mile-high ceilings — they will be missed.

It's even sadder for downtown Rapid City, which used to boast two large theaters. Now there will be one less reason to come to downtown Rapid City at night — unless, hoping against hope, someone buys the theater and reopens it.

The closing of the Elks is a lesson in modern retailing that downtown businesses should consider carefully as the 1990s begin. Mega-malls, mini-malls and multiplexes are popping up all over the country to offer customers choices, convenience and comfort. They do this, in part, through integrated planning and promotion, two virtues that are not always apparent in downtown areas.

Wake up, downtown Rapid City!

To survive and prosper into the 21st century, downtown merchants need all the resourcefulness and imagination they can muster, and they need to focus that energy into viable plans. That's why the downtown business improvement district (BID) proposed by the Downtown Development Corporation seemed like such a good idea. It coupled disciplined, integrated, long-range planning with a concrete, reliable way to finance those plans.

Some downtown merchants objected to the cost of the district, which downtown businesses would have to pay. Now the Downtown Development Corporation is working with opponents of the plan to iron out their differences.

The objections were understandable. But the bottom line is, the future will not be bright for the downtown area, for greater Rapid City or for South Dakota, unless we are willing to make investments in that future. Sometimes that involves sacrifices. Sometimes it involves new ways of doing business.

The Elks Theater was the symbol of the old way of doing business. And there was much to be said for it. It was elegant. It had style. It had character. So does downtown Rapid City. To survive, it will need more.