Elks to be 6th in recent months

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Within the past two months, downtown Rapid City has lost five businesses. When the Elks Theater closes its doors New Year’s Eve, the talley will climb to six.

“This does not bode well for downtown,” said Bryan Schnell, redevelopment director for the Downtown Development Corp. Within the last 60 days, Chase Manhattan and Card Corner announced they were closing. Computerland and Two Wheeler Dealer moved out of the downtown business district, and Black Hills Spas went out of business.

“Then you have people who tell you the downtown is doing just fine. They say ‘we don’t need to do anything, thank you very much.’ I don’t know how many holes we have to have, and how many major businesses have to leave before someone wakes up and says ‘we have to do something.’” Schnell said.

Vacant buildings are not easy to fill. But when a vacancy is filled, it is at least one of the Elks Theater, J.C. Penney or the Chase Manhattan building they are tougher to fill. “People just don’t buy Elks Theaters and J.C. Penney buildings to open up a shoe store,” Schnell said.

The Downtown Development Corp. and Business Improvement Board have been working on a Business Improvement District (BID) plan to fill those voids. The plan calls for enhanced marketing and recruitment efforts to downtown. Efforts to place small businesses in the plan in place have been stalled by a debate over the cost.

“Downtowns just don’t get better by doing nothing,” Schnell said. “The downtown has been treading water for a long time. It’s too well to be sick, but too sick to be well.” He said the BID was the tool to restore downtown’s health.

In fact, the Downtown Development Corp. was using the BID as an incentive to keep the Elks open. The theater’s closing had been rumored for some time, and earlier this year United Artists had dispelled the rumor when it took the Elks off of its “endangered list,” and gave it one year to become profitable or risk a minor operation.

“We thought we had reached a gentlemen’s agreement or understanding that the Elks was not in danger of closing for another year. We thought we had a year to get our (redevelopment) plans together,” Schnell said.

Although he is disappointed, Schnell tempered his anger toward United Artists.

“Put yourself in United Artists’ shoes,” he said. “Why would they want to put out a marginal theater unless we can go to them and say, ‘United Artists, here is our plan. Here is how the Elks fits in, and here is how we have drawn more people to the downtown. Here is why it is worth your while to stay open.’ Unfortunately, we haven’t been able to get that together.

“Absent of that plan you have nowhere they wouldn’t want to close it if they were not making money, and if we’re doing nothing as a community to keep it here? It’s unfortunate, what we can do as a community to help them keep their commitment to Rapid City,” he said.

The Elks is more than a business and a theater for the arts. The Elks, has plays, theater, and comedy shop presentations. It would make a tremendous historically restored building,” Thurst said.

Several years ago a theater organization considered renovating the theater. A developer was brought in to look at the site.

Schnell said companies often had "no compete" clauses in the real estate contract, which would prevent the building from being used as a theater. If United Artists institutes that clause, Schnell said downtown Rapid City might likely have another J.C. Penney building, which has been vacant about 12 years. (Corporate officers with United Artists Entertainments(BID) did not return phone calls to The Rapid City Journal.)

Any other use of the building would most likely require a building. Thurst said. Rapid City architect Fred Thurston has done a computer-generated drawing of what the theater would look like if it were restored to its original design.

“I think it has a lot of potential. I would like to see it become a center for the arts, has plays, theater, and comedy shop presentations. It would make a tremendous historically restored building," Thurston said.

"A (local) banker convinced him it was worth a look and to invest," Thurston said. "That attitude, he said, hurt local efforts to restore the downtown. Mayor Keith Carlyle said he would ask the Business Improvement Board to increase its efforts downtown. "You never stagnate in a downtown, you either decrease or increase business. It will either flourish or die. I would rather see our downtowns of the downtown flourish, prosper and develop," Carlyle said.

Schnell remains optimistic that a compromise will be reached in the BID debate.

“The time for fighting is over,” he said. “We have to work together to save our downtown.”

Sunday’s closing of the Elks Theater will not stop the downtown businesses from giving away a spa.

The giveaway is part of the annual downtown holiday promotion. The announcement of the winner was to be made at the Elks Theater on Jan. 6.

Bryan Schnell, redevelopment director for the Downtown Development Corp., said the drawing would go on as scheduled Jan. 6. Where it will take place is still uncertain. Schnell said it was possible it would still be held at the Elks. If not, it will be moved and the location will be announced at a later date, Schnell said.

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