Downtown booster sees new life

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Assistant City Editor

By midsummer, downtown Rapid City property owners will receive a plan promoters hope will help determine the business district’s future.

Bryan Schnell, redevelopment director of the Downtown Development Corp., predicts the outcome will make or break his 1-year-old organization. And, he says, the projects may influence residents for “the rest of our lifetime.”

The list will cover perennial problems, from parking to pigeons, as well as long-range considerations of rebuilding streets and routes to Mount Rushmore, and extending landscaping. The plan will be presented to business and building owners and eventually figure in the city’s master plan, says Schnell.

Calling downtown the heart of the city’s cultural and economic activity, Schnell says the development plan, among other things, will suggest a financial commitment from the private sector as leverage in negotiating with city hall.

Public-private funding cooperation will be needed because government subsidies for such things as street improvements, public restrooms or landscaping “ain’t gonna happen,” says Schnell.

And the involvement of the Downtown Development Corp. is needed because managing the area as a business “is a job that needs to be attended to,” says Schnell.

What business and building owners decide will “determine if the Downtown Development Corp. is going to be the organization that helps downtown become the strongest economic area between Denver and St. Paul, or if we’re just a flash in the plan,” said Schnell.

The decision would come in the second year of the three-year commitment to the Rapid City Main Street Program. The redevelopment authority is funded by city, state and private money, and is charged with developing a strategy to improve downtown.

Downtown is a 40-square-block area bounded by Omaha and Kansas City streets, West and East boulevards.

Planning for the long-range needs of downtown began in 1985 when Mayor Art LaCroix appointed the Heart of the City Task Force. The Main Street Program evolved from that, starting under a new name in 1988 as part of an economic development project aided by the state and associated with the non-profit National Main Street Center in Washington, D.C.

Filling empty buildings downtown and preserving the historic district that dates to Rapid City’s beginnings are among the primary goals. Schnell points out results can be seen in the renewed interest in preservation projects. Several false fronts have been removed to reveal unique architecture, a process Schnell hopes will prove the domino theory.

And the changes, he says, will benefit the community in the long run as well as revitalize downtown.

Studies show restoring buildings increases sales and helps stabilize property values.

The campaign to clean up and fix up is at the core of one of Schnell’s objectives: to make downtown well-lit, well-groomed and safe. That image, along with a “bustling and fun” atmosphere created by scheduled promotions (such as bringing the Seated Lincoln to the corner of St. Joe and 6th streets and this year’s St. Patrick’s Day festivities) will attract shoppers, he said.

“We know that 2 million people turn the corner of Omaha and Mount Rushmore Road every year... What we have to do is get them to...alter their travel plans by giving them something they never expected,” said Schnell.

The relatively compact shopping district is loaded with vintage brick buildings, Schnell said. “We should tear off the facades and let (the original exteriors) shine through... People are hungry for (historical)

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The redevelopment is not just
gear to tourism. Schnell says his
organization also is addressing
year-round shopping, and notes
there are more stores and services
downtown than at the Rushmore
Mall.

Business recruitment is a more
subtle campaign, not as visual as
restoring a building's front or
advertising for shoppers. So Schnell
and college interns have stepped off
measurements of buildings
downtown and compiled on computer an
inventory of available spaces.
Schnell claims his "computer jazz"
is more current and extensive than
the county assessor's.

"You know how you get that?
Here's how," he says, revealing a
quarter-size hole in the sole of a
worn loafer.

His follow-up work also includes
meetings to forge partnerships
between city hall and downtown, and
between the various organizations
active in the community. Establishing
communication, he says, will
strengthen downtown, link it to the
civic center and the new hotel, as
well as "bring in the fold"
businesses complaining of being left
out.

"We want to let them be what
they are, but tie them in and make
it all stronger," said Schnell.

A related but separate committee
is assisting in that effort. Appointed
by Mayor Keith Carlyle, the City
Center Resource Council represents
various entities and is working to
establish itself as a clearinghouse
for various community improve-
ment proposals.

Schnell, a member of the council,
says the panel's contributions are
assisting in developing consistent
signs at entrances to downtown.

Other assistance is expected, says
chairman Sharon Lee.

"There are a lot of good ideas, a
lot of things happening within the
community," said Lee. "We want to
make sure the (proposed world-
class museum) doesn't die. We want
to make certain we've explored
every avenue."