Window of a renovated Main St. business (above left) and updated Duhamel Building (above) are among downtown development projects. (Staff photos by Jim Holland)
Development of downtown tops agenda

Ken Baka
Staff Writer

Downtown Rapid City is plugged into economic development. It has money, help from the state, a tested plan and a person to oversee it all.

The program is called South Dakota Main Street. Three years from now, when the program ends, more downtown buildings will have been fixed up, more shoppers will be spending more money and more space will be used by businesses and offices, if all goes as planned.

Most of all, three years from now, the central business district will be well supported by an organization of people and their plans for its future.

The program has Bryan Schnell excited. "Fired up," said Schnell, a 29-year-old Rapid City native and recent Phoenix resident who was hired to oversee Main Street. He promised he would work "from dawn to dusk, seven days a week until we get this thing done."

Rapid City is one of four Main Street programs in South Dakota. The program is run by the Governor's Office of Economic Development and the National Main Street Center, a division of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, based in Washington, D.C.

In many ways, Schnell's success ultimately will depend on how well he can work with people who have a stake in downtown. His role is that of the promoter, the go-between, the facilitator, the person to unite everyone.

"What we're trying to do is to accomplish something for the entire city," he said. "We need to create the image that downtown is alive and well — that 'I'll go downtown because it's got what I need.'"

Downtown revitalization is nothing new in Rapid City.

The Prairie States Life Insurance Building is one result of an urban renewal program that began after the flood. Seven years later, the city spruced up downtown sidewalks with new brick, benches and lampposts. In the early 1980s, the city worked with merchants to set up a fund to improve parking — an effort that evolved into parking financed with sales taxes.

There also has been private investment, such as last summer's renovation of the historic Duhamel Building, at Sixth and St. Joseph streets, and in remodeled buildings on Main Street.
And in 1985 the Heart of the City Task Force was created. Originally, the group was to plan for downtown improvement. Now, with the start-up of Main Street, the task force has become the Rapid City Downtown Development Foundation — the board responsible for helping set goals for the Main Street program.

Schnell's salary and some of the program's costs will be paid with revenues from a Tax Increment District set up in downtown Rapid City in 1985. Revenues are expected to be $95,000 over three years. Private donations and state Community Development Block Grants will add to the fund.

According to the application submitted by the city, a key to the program is to "reverse the trend of increasing vacancies" downtown (much of it a historic district with buildings constructed from 1881 to 1927.)

"With several of the key historic structures empty at this time, downtown Rapid City is typical of many American communities," the application said.

"Most of these vacant structures are prime candidates for restoration, and an efficient campaign of downtown promotion could help fill these buildings with new, vital business interests," it said.

The city hopes the Main Street program will give downtown shoppers an "experience something more complete than the sterile

See 3-year on page 2
3-year plan has ambitious goals

Continued from page 1
condition environment typical of a mall.”

The program will involve promotion and studies to stimulate real estate investment. And, depending on the approval of the advisory board, the program could expand to east of Fifth Street, according to the city’s application.

Specifically, the city has listed these goals for three years from now:

- A comprehensive downtown plan for beyond three years;
- A permanent committee, staff person or specialist to carry out the plan;
- More than 95 percent occupancy rate in the area;
- More than 50 percent increase in retail sales;
- Removing so-called flat “slip-covers” from the buildings, such as those at Plummer Piano and Woolworth’s.

Schnell knows he has hurdles to overcome — that some merchants won’t believe in the project. But he said he would work to win their trust and incorporate their ideas.

“I want to get everybody’s point of view and mold these things together and come up with a solid downtown, one that’s palatable for everybody,” said Schnell.