Consultants give ideas to improve downtown

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Rapid City’s Main Street planners need to better define the downtown area and to provide features that identify it to visitors, said Main Street improvement consultants Thursday.

The downtown area also needs better signs, broader planning and less litter, said the four-member resource team.

The team has been touring downtown Rapid City since Tuesday. Members assessed parking, building designs, and infrastructure and made their recommendations Thursday at a press conference.

Dan Guimond, Denver, who assessed the city’s economic development potential, said the city needed to develop a consensus on a long-range plan for the downtown area.

Such a plan should attempt to define the downtown area through a design that emphasizes the city’s historic features and unifies the business district, he said.

Guimond, a marketing expert, suggested that development of a vacant lot at the corner of Sixth and Main streets could be a “major step toward creating the retail space we’re talking about here.”

Also, he said, the east end of the downtown area must be tied in more with the west side. “The east end doesn’t provide a feeling of the downtown,” said Guimond. “It’s a part of downtown and it needs to be tied in with it.”

The downtown area, over the last 10 years, has provided more specialized businesses. Office buildings and service businesses have generally developed on the west end. Restaurants, motels and other businesses serving travelers have sprung up on the east side.

That kind of development is positive, said Guimond. With improved design and a comprehensive plan, those establishments could better tap the business of students, tourists and workers, he said.

“Your downtown is a lot of things, and it should continue to be a lot of things. The city needs to continue to ask questions about what the downtown can be.”

Rodney Swink, a landscape architect from North Carolina, said Rapid City and its downtown had “a very strong image,” created mostly by Mount Rushmore National Memorial and other historical points. “Other communities are trying to create an image. You have one.”

But the city is not making the best of this image, Swink said. The city needs to create linkages that draw visitors to the downtown, he said, adding that once the visitor is there the city needs to create a positive visual image that will make the visitor want to stay.

Specifically, the city should consider creating landmarks — signs, water fountains or flags — that indicate to visitors when they have reached the downtown, Swink said. Also, continual maintenance is needed to keep the city clean, he said, and sign ordinances need to be enforced that enhance, rather than detract, from the city’s image.

Recommendations also came from two other consultants. Betsy Jackson, program associate of the National Main Street Center of Washington, D.C., gave recommendations on promotion of the downtown. And Molly Cowan, coordinator of the South Dakota Main Street Program, made suggestions on community organization.

Chris Palmer, chairman of the board of the Rapid City Downtown Development Corporation, said the consultants’ recommendations would be incorporated into a downtown development plan already being prepared. “This couldn’t have come at a better time,” he said.