Understanding needed on downtown BID idea

Protesting and wrecking the proposed Rapid City Downtown Business Improvement District without understanding it is economic vandalism — perhaps even self-immolation.

There were some good points and significant progress made at Monday’s meeting to explain and question the proposed Rapid City Downtown Business Improvement District. Unfortunately, the occasion was marred by confusion and what appeared in some instances to be a willful lack of understanding.

The Downtown Development Corporation is trying to initiate a Downtown Business Improvement District to turn around Rapid City’s declining downtown business district. The idea is to solve common problems, make downtown more desirable, and increase the profitability and aesthetics of the area. A BID essentially imposes a tax within a narrowly defined geographic area in order to raise money for special projects and needs affecting that area. In the case of the Rapid City proposal, the charge depends on the square footage of the business, with a minimum payment of $100 and maximum payment of $5,000. There are exceptions, with non-profit and seasonal businesses paying less, and governmental, religious and smaller residential buildings escaping BID participation.

The Downtown Development Corporation is trying to improve the downtown business climate with that money, not drive people out of business or create phony-baloney executive jobs for administrators, as some people at Monday’s meeting seemed to believe.

Worse, the meeting was intentionally hijacked for 15 minutes by BID opponents in the form of a long-winded tirade that was entirely misdirected. The speaker claimed the BID proposal was illegal because state statutes had not been followed. Of course they haven’t. The matter has not gone before the city council or to the mayor. The statutes in question come into play when a BID proposal is made — not before it is made. All that has occurred so far is that members of the Downtown Development Corporation have spent much time trying to find a way to improve downtown, and are proposing formation of a BID to accomplish that end. As part of that process, they have organized three public meetings to gather and share information.

The meetings this week (noon today at the Elks Theatre, 5:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Rapid City Common Council chambers in the city/school administration building, and the Monday meeting) are simply explanation and information sessions. Nothing official begins to happen until a BID request is made to city administrators. And if people downtown don’t support the BID, rest assured it will never get off the ground.

Those affected by the BID proposal — those owning or occupying businesses in the area bounded by Omaha and Kansas City streets and West and East boulevards — should take the time to read the proposal, then attend either the meeting today or the one tomorrow to get their questions answered and offer suggestions. Once informed, it will be time to make the personal decision to oppose or support the BID.

A BID may not be the right answer for improving downtown Rapid City. But making up your mind before you have the facts is definitely the wrong answer.