Businessman believes historic renovation will pay off

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Staff Writer

Stewart Metler says his jewelry store may some day be as much a gem to behold as the gold and diamonds within it.

Metler’s Gold Plus is located in a historic building that is part of Rapid City’s historic downtown business district. The brick building, at 114 St. Joseph Street west of the Alex Johnson Hotel, is a two-story structure with tall glass windows and a large facade.

By the 1920s, the building has been occupied by several businesses and has gone through many changes. Its most recent change has been a simple — but expensive attempt to bring its history back to life.

Metler has removed some signs and a rear wall to expose the facade to the original brick exterior and some panes of the original leaded glass. Now he is considering renovations to the inside of the building that would reveal its original copper ceiling.

“I think it’s going to be money well spent,” said Metler, who estimates he has spent at least $4,000 on the changes made so far.

Metler, who comes from Wall where his family runs other jewelry stores, said he had found tourists attracted to businesses that offered a western and historic style. “Most of our business is from back east, and even if you’re from Minnesota you want to see something western.”

The changes made at Metler’s store are compatible with the goals of the Rapid City Downtown Development Corporation, said Lee Geiger, chairman of the corporation’s Design Committee.

Geiger said in 10 years the Rapid City business district could be second only to Mount Rushmore in tourist appeal in the area if business owners such as Metler continued to remodel with an eye toward preserving the district’s history.

“Documentation shows that people give the opportunity of a historically redeveloped downtown will spend more time in that place,” said Geiger.

The historic district of the downtown area includes the buildings on both sides of St. Joseph and Main streets between Sixth and Seventh streets and the buildings on both sides of Sixth and Seventh streets between St. Joseph and Main Streets.

The buildings are primarily two-story brick structures. Many, like the Sweeney building on the corner of Main and Seventy streets, date back to the 1880s. And newer of the historical buildings, like the Alex Johnson Hotel, were built in the 1920s.

Many of the early buildings were built in an Italianate commercial style, with tall, ornate window frames and columns. Others, like the Buell Building at the corner of Sixth and St. Joseph streets, were built in an eclectic fashion, with a variety of materials and styles.

Downtown developers gradually have been reaching their goal of restoring the downtown area. Slowly, facades have changed: new signs have been put up and the buildings’ original brick exteriors have been exposed.

“It’s a process of several transitional, modest improvements, as opposed to quantum leaps,” said Geiger.

People who come downtown every day do not always notice the changes, said Geiger. But to the infrequent visitor the changes can be very noticeable and appealing.

The slow pace of change in the downtown is mostly the result of the high cost of some renovations, said Geiger. Downtown developers are limited too by the lack of ordinances that would encourage development consistent with restoration goals.

Currently, the city has a sign ordinance and rules governing awnings. It has nothing governing the other ways business owners display their facades.

Geiger said that as the development commission succeeds in showing the economic benefits of restoration, more business owners will be willing to make changes and more city officials will be eager for ordinances that enhance the project.

Many businesses, he said, have been positively affected by restoration. He said 80 percent of the people who had renovated their storefronts had seen increases in business.

The Downtown Development Corporation plans to emphasize the history of the downtown business district during centennial activities this year in Rapid City. Metler, a developer-director Bryan Schnell.

So far few plans have been made. One idea is to hold a chautauqua during the Heritage Festival in July. During the chautauqua, an actor portraying a character from Rapid City’s Main Street history — perhaps Tom Sweeney or Charles Buell — would perform.

For downtown planners, the emphasis on the history of the business district is also an emphasis on the future.

In ten years, said Geiger, considerable renovation could be accomplished, along with several other improvements that would make the area more attractive and accessible.

He mentioned more landscaping, more consistency in signs from store to store, at least one multi-level parking structure, reconstruction of streets and sidewalks, and possible changes in street names that would remind visitors of Mount Rushmore.

Eventually, Metler said, all downtown store owners will want to restore the historic nature of their businesses. “It’ll be a natural effect.”

The biggest obstacle now for most business owners is money. But, in many cases, Metler said, it can be an investment worth making.