Plan to feed hungry downtown is dropped

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Staff Writer

The Salvation Army will not feed the hungry in a city-owned downtown Rapid City building because of opposition from downtown merchants.

The Rapid City Common Council dropped the plan Monday night after Rapid City Salvation Army board Chairman Merle Pavek said, "The pressure is so extreme, it would not be prudent to do that."

Pavek had wanted to use the former AVCO building at 521 St. Joseph St. to feed the homeless and hungry. The city bought the building earlier this year and will demolish it in February or March to make way for more downtown parking. The building is vacant.

Under a proposal approved last week by the Common Council's Legal and Finance Committee, the Salvation Army would have used the building in January, rent-free, to serve one meal a day, six days a week. (The Salvation Army would have paid for utilities and insurance.)

Pavek said he wanted to test the program for a month to see if street people could be fed downtown without disrupting business. "If it doesn't work, we'll quit," Pavek said last week.

But Pavek withdrew his request Monday night at the regular meeting of the Common Council. He cited "extreme pressure" from the Downtown Association of Rapid City, a merchants group.

Pavek abandoned the plan, despite the Legal and Finance Committee's approval, because, "The Salvation Army's philosophy is harmony. I'm not saying this (location) is where it has to be, and neither is the Army."

The Salvation Army currently serves one meal, three times a week, from its Cherry Street headquarters. (Faith Temple serves two meals a week.) Pavek said the downtown location would be better because most of Rapid City's estimated 350 homeless congregate along Rapid Creek, "under the bridges and in the dumpsters," close to downtown. "They have to walk two miles (to Cherry Street)," he said. "Most won't do it. They'd go to the dumpsters."

At a meeting last week, more than 30 Downtown Association members voted unanimously to oppose Pavek's first request, to serve two meals a day, six days a week, for about two months.

Even after the request was modified to one month and one meal a day, the group opposed the plan.

Some merchants said the so-called Downtown Association is taking too much heat for its stance on the mission of the Salvation Army. Rather, members said they rejected the plan because they do not want the Salvation Army's services, which are funded by the federal government and other private sources, in their downtown community.
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Some merchants said the so-called “street people” might discourage shoppers from coming downtown during the Christmas season, the busiest season of the year.

Anna Marie Thatcher, president of the Downtown Association, said the AVCO building is not the right location. “I don’t think a feeding program in the middle of a retail area is a good idea,” she said after the meeting Monday. “You need space to do that kind of thing.”

She objected to the AVCO site because of “traffic pattern changes” and the possibility of litter in the business district.

Thatcher also said the Downtown Association has been unfairly criticized for opposing the plan. “I have a hard time with having my Christianity questioned just because I’m not willing to accept something without question,” she said.

Thatcher told the council she would work with the Salvation Army to find an alternate site. “I don’t dispute the need to find a solution,” she said.

But she said other community organizations should get involved. “We have five or six churches downtown, and they don’t want to talk about those people either,” she said. “The churches have kitchens that aren’t used five or six days a week. So we’ve got the space (to feed people). It’s unfortunate, but the Downtown Association has become the bad guy, the scapegoat, for concerns that a lot of people in the community have.”

Dr. Warren Rutledge, president of the Rapid City Ministerial Association and pastor at First Presbyterian Church, said Tuesday he believes the Downtown Association is taking too much heat for its stance on the feeding program. He said downtown churches could be doing more to help the homeless and the hungry.

Rutledge said Thatcher is right in her assessment that it is easy to come up with a “Band-Aid-type approach” to feeding people and never get at the underlying problem of why so many people are homeless and hungry.

“Maybe we forget what our faith tells us, that you see the face of Jesus in every one of these people,” he said.

Thatcher also said Pavek’s plan would have fed only a small portion of Rapid City’s homeless. “Why have a program that feeds 25?”, she asked. “Let’s work at solving the whole problem.”

Pavek said he would not give up. “We’ll be back,” he said. “Somehow, we’ll get it done. I’m not sure how, but we’ll get it done. These people need a bowl of soup.”

The new hotel will create jobs.

Fact: The new hotel will employ about 200 people—plus the construction jobs. It’s positive economic growth that Rapid City needs.

Paid for by Citizens for a Positive Future
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