Downtown has future, says study

Ron Bender
Staff Writer

A new study of downtown Rapid City has found that the central business district, far from being an economically depressed area, is instead a prime area for business development.

“All you have to do is read the study and you’ll find the downtown is anything but dying,” said Kenneth Bordner, president of the Bloomington, Minn., consulting firm which bears his name.

“Things seem to be moving, and our offices are encouraged by what we can find for your city,” he said Saturday.

“It’s got a lot of things going for it, and just because nothing is visible as far as mortar and bricks doesn’t mean efforts aren’t being made to get something going,” said James R. Swan, publisher of the Rapid City Journal and one of the local businessmen who underwrote the $8,000 cost of the report.

The report describes the development potential of the 20-block core area. It will now be used to encourage businesses to locate here.

“It’s a sales tool so someone who does not know Rapid City can take this document and in a short time have a good idea and feel for the core area,” said Swan.

The report contains information about past, present and future economic activity in both downtown and the entire city, including the relocation of two major downtown anchor stores, J. C. Penney and Sears, to the Rushmore Mall.

Maps and photos are included, with business locations and central business district boundaries, outlined. Other information is about population, parking, employment, residents’ income, geographic location of Rapid City, and the extent of the city’s trade area.

Boundaries of the central business district are Omaha Street on the north, Kansas City on the south, West Boulevard on the west and 5th Street on the east.

The report said downtown developments now under construction or being planned are: the new office of American State Bank at 7th and Main and a restored commercial section east of the bank on Main Street; a publicly funded downtown beautification project which will include pedestrian islands with trees, street furniture and special paving; a downtown parking district established by the city; a multi-story apartment building on 5th Street, between St. Joseph and Kansas City, proposed by Rapid City businessman John Vuicurvehich; and two hotel complexes, one planned by the Knechits and the other, a 180-room Hilton Hotel and convention center developed by Del Bjordahl of Rapid City at Mount Rushmore Road and Main Street.

Ground breaking for the Hilton was scheduled Monday afternoon.

“Those major developments, particularly the hotels, will provide an impetus for the further development of the downtown area,” said the Bordner report.

“In most cities (especially in downtown areas) new development spawns additional projects. In a central business district this often results from renewed confidence and community pride, in addition to supporting economic factors,” said the report.

Bordner said 35 copies of the report are in Rapid City and he has 65 extra copies to show clients of his firm or other interested businesses.

His job now is to present downtown Rapid City as a possible location for retail and other business clients of Bordner’s consulting firm, along with other cities with which his firm has contracted.

“We expect to see some benefits to the community,” said Swan. “Bordner has the track record and the reputation. He deals with retail, wholesale, restaurant chains and hotel chains. Virtually anybody not in Rapid City already, or perhaps someone in Rapid City who would like to expand.

“It’s a sensitive business. He’s got to keep the respect of his clients, yet do what is best for the downtown area. He might be dealing with five companies in the same business and has got to keep them separated until one shows a firm interest. Then he’ll move,” said Swan.

“And if they’re not interested in downtown Rapid City, he’s not interested in them,”

Bordner was also a consultant for Don and Bob Knecht, who want to build
a major hotel-convention center complex on two blocks of property they own on Omaha Street, between Mount Rushmore Road and West Boulevard. Details and financing of that project, announced Sept. 5, are still in progress.

The downtown study is separate from that done for the Knecht brothers, but incorporates much of the same information.

The report is addressed to Larry Waller, president of the Rapid City Area Chamber of Commerce, but no chamber money was used to pay for it.

“We decided the chamber would be the focal point because there really is no committee to work on this. We just raised the money,” said Swan. “Some of those interested in helping the downtown are not even in downtown. But they’re interested in the community. If this would help, they were interested in contributing.”

Bordner is also a consultant for shopping center concerns, but said future development of new shopping centers will not continue at the same pace as in the past 10 to 15 years.

He said as middle market cities become more developed, there will be fewer potential sites for new development. That will mean more attention will be paid to established downtown areas and business will return to those areas.

Bordner’s enthusiastic about it, said Swan. “He can talk about lower cost per square foot of property in the downtown area than in a nearby mall. And he’s saying, ‘there’s a place in downtown for you. I’ll help you find it.’”