

November 10, 1977

Rapid City's Free Newsmagazine-Shopper



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City officials, downtown businessmen issued 'do something' challenge by peers

By David Super

A challenge to "do something, right or wrong" was issued to the city and Central Business District Beautification Task Force last week from a summary of suggestions made by downtown businessmen interested in revitalizing their neighborhood.

Details of the now or never mandate were presented to Chamber of Commerce and City Council members plus the mayor by Dick Robinson, spokesman for the Black Hills Association of Architects, the professional group that has been assisting Chamber officials with the downtown study.

Robinson told the group that invitations were sent to 365 business people in the downtown area to participate in the two-day "People Plan"

workshops that were conducted more than one month ago to obtain opinions and suggestions for rebuilding downtown. The committee convinced 125 people, 36 percent of those invited, to fill out questionnaires and participate in the workshop.

Results were reviewed and statistics compiled from an eight-part questionnaire. In order of their priority set by workshop participants the key themes were: Organization, parking, image for downtown, financial incentives to stimulate building or remodeling and traffic-transportation.

Organization

Establishment of a strong downtown business organization with power to act was listed as the number one task.

During discussion of this possibility, Rapid City

banker Jack Allmon recalled this was first tried in 1960 when downtown businessmen organized outside the Chamber of Commerce in order to promote downtown. Retailer Nate Horowitz added that organization remains important and that any group must work with the support of the Chamber of Commerce if it is to be successful.

The suggestions for creation of a downtown group also indicated the group should work to "reduce or eliminate the often expressed sentiment that the city is always on the backs of the business person and that the city's codes and ordinances are impractical and only used to hassle the merchant..."

Although it was the most discussed, the workshop officials ranked parking as the number two priority

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Downtown

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for downtown.

Among suggestions were: Removal of parking meter fees for a six month trial and a switch to writing tickets only for those who stayed at a parking spot beyond the hourly limits.

Establishment of off street parking lots at Sixth and Main and elsewhere in the downtown area. Commitment of parking meter revenues to bonds that would be used to construct off street parking. (see related story on parking meters)

The study noted there was a great divergence of opinion concerning the location of off street parking facilities and parking meters in general.

Improving and unifying the environment and image of the downtown was discussed third with a host of suggestions for sprucing up the area.

High on the list of suggestions was creation of a convenient, pleasant and safe pedestrian link to the Civic Center. Various ideas for flow-through or semi-malls were also advanced as were suggestions for center block crosswalks controlled by stoplights linked to corner lights.

Ideas for landscaping, trees, adequate lighting and strict sign ordinances were also presented.

The element of preserving what remains and enhancing new "historical" elements in the downtown were mentioned in the image portion of the discussion. City officials present noted that several federal programs exist to assist with historic preservation.

Incentives

Workshop participants called for city officials to provide more assistance to downtown businessmen and land owners on the availability and technicalities of various programs that might provide financial or "tax-break" incentives in the downtown.

Equalization of property evaluation and assessments between central business district commercial property and other general commercial property was felt to be necessary. The study further called for all people downtown and all levels of government to be involved in financing the refurbishing of the area.

Traffic - Transportation

The first suggestion for the traffic-transportation category called for rerouting of commercial, tourist and local traffic around, not through, the central business district in an effort to reduce congestion.

A call for a "jitney" or "mini-bus" shuttle system between downtown and the Civic Center, motel

districts and perimeter employee parking lots was also made.

Workshop participants also liked the idea of building a new transportation center downtown that would be the headquarters for the mini-bus, taxis, tour busses, airport limos and inter-city busses.

The questionnaire asked people what the central business district "needs" most. In order of importance, these items were listed: Convenient parking, a pedestrian link to the Civic Center, removal of parking meters, a creation of a strong historic image, control of signs and, finally, more tourist traffic.

During the discussion which followed presentation of the report, Mayor Art LaCroix said it was important for downtown businessmen not to get hung up on the problems associated with downtown. Calling the area already a strong shopping center, the Mayor urged the people to review and build on the positive assets already in place.

When asked what will happen first in order to answer the challenge to "do something," architect Robinson said that organization of a downtown group would quickly come first.

The initial assignment for the group would be promotion of a solution to acquiring the proposed parking lot for the corner of Sixth and Main.

Mayor LaCroix further suggested that a strong liaison be established between the group and the City Council and other local government officials.

