Attractiveness of the city’s downtown area (top of photo) to persons visiting the new civic center (bottom of photo) will depend on easy pedestrian access between the two (Staff aerial photo).
Consultant expresses optimism for revitalization of downtown

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Downtown Rapid City — not just the 600 and 700 blocks of Main Street — are in need of substantial revitalization, according to David Wilcox.

But the director of urban planning for Genge Consultants is optimistic about the downtown area, if the proper steps are taken.

The Los Angeles-based firm is preparing a report for the city's Urban Renewal Dept. concerning prospective uses of the 600 and 700 blocks on the north side of Main Street.

Wilcox said the urban renewal area along Main Street has excellent possibilities. "The buildings are marvelous — in good shape and with active economic uses," he said.

An immediate need in the downtown area, Wilcox said, is "hassle-free, off-street parking" that will compete with the convenience offered by shopping centers.

A major source of concern to Wilcox is the lack of an adequate — and attractive — pedestrian path from the new civic center to the downtown area.

Such a path must safely cross Rapid Creek, Omaha Street and the railroad tracks, he noted.

To encourage pedestrian flow from the civic center, however, a quality motor inn is needed in the downtown area, he said, as well as good restaurants.

The downtown area must be made a place where people want to go, Wilcox said, not just get through. It must, itself, be a tourist attraction, he said.

Wilcox said that in the near future Rapid City will have "one of the finest greenbelts any city ever had.'

That greenbelt, he continued, should be utilized by the city to make the entire downtown area more attractive. Wilcox also pointed to Rapid City's "quality public investment." He said he hadn't seen such a collection of recently built public buildings "just check them off," he said — the civic center, the new high school, the new library, the Dahl Fine Arts Center, the new post office, the new federal building, and the new hospital.

"The community looks wealthy," he said.

Wilcox said Rapid City's downtown area holds a promise for rehabilitation — he pointed to the old post office building as an excellent example — but added that investors must be farsighted enough to make the investment.

On the public sector side, the city must offer incentives, he said. What those incentives might be, Wilcox couldn't say. He said he didn't have the feeling for what would be acceptable.

But such incentives might include public improvements in the downtown area, environmental improvements or amenities. One incentive in the urban renewal area, he said, is cleared, raw land — "that's hard to capture in a downtown area."

Wilcox referred several times to trees on Main Street — rather the lack of them.

"Trees provide a human scale," he said, "as well as diminish the impact of the auto, provide good color to go with brick and stone buildings, soften shadows, absorb sound and make a good sight."

Wilcox was disappointed not so much by what he found in Rapid City, but by what he didn't find.

Rapid City was the end of the line for railroads to the Black Hills, he said, but that doesn't show. He said a collection of old sleeping and dining cars and engines would be an interesting attraction in the downtown area.

Also missing, he said, was a marker identifying the original townsite — the first square mile of Rapid City.

The future of the downtown area, Wilcox said, depends upon the "thinkers of the city . . . the movers, the shakers." But, he said, what is done in the next 12 months is important.

Rapid City's downtown core has been dealt some severe blows, Wilcox said — the closing of Newberry's, the future closings in the downtown area, at least of Penney's, Woolworth's and Rapid Chevrolet.

But Wilcox also pointed to businesses which have made a commitment to the downtown area. Besides the financial institutions, he said, there are the recently remodeled Rapid City Journal and the Creamery.

Sears is also committed to the downtown area to mid 1980, according to William Baron, owner of the Sears building. The firm recently signed a new lease which has renewal options.

But the downtown will survive, Wilcox said, because of loyalty to downtown merchants and because of specialty shops in the area which are not or will not be available in shopping centers on the city's fringes.