

A half-cent investment in future

From time to time I have written about infrastructure, the all important capacity of a community to create and develop economic growth.

Usually I have looked at our relatively invisible telecommunications infrastructure

that carries our voices, and soon our images, to the rest of the world over what will be, eventually, the Information Superhighway.

But this time, I write on Rapid City's physical and financial infrastructure. With the

special vote on the extension of the half cent sales tax coming on Tuesday, it is worthwhile to look at its past accomplishments and its impact on our prospects for the future.

The history of that half-cent sales tax, the bulk of which is paid by visitors, is an unqualified success. With it, Rapid City's Convention Center has become the center of a thriving convention business and a focal point for Rapid City. The Convention and Visitors Bureau, so

successful under Julie Jensen's direction, would struggle mightily without it.

For those of us living in Rapid City, it is a wonderful asset. Can you imagine the Thrillers being here without it? What about the many concerts and world-class performers that now visit us? Country fairs in winter or the Black Hills Stock Show?

We have gotten our money's worth and more.

But if it has been so successful, why do we need more development? Isn't what we have enough? Why is such economic "encouragement" important when business seems to be going along pretty well?

Investment for and in the future is the answer. Without the right infrastructure, we cannot expand our business base and attract the new visitors we will need to retain the quality of life Rapid City residents are so rightfully proud of. Standing still is no answer.

In these times of significant economic change, standing still may be fatal. A glance at some of our region's economic underpinnings is sobering.

Agricultural employment continues its century-long decline, dwindling with mechanization and the consolidation of farming and ranching into fewer and fewer entities. And now all of American agriculture finds itself competing with increasingly able foreign

growers. We have already seen double digit drops in market share. It will be tougher for South Dakota farmers.

Right now, the Black Hills timber industry faces the bitter irony of limited production in the face of some of the best timber prices ever. Long term, the industry is caught among the rocks and hard places of environmentalists screaming "no" at each opportunity, industry consolidation, reduced employment through mechanization and the real limits of Black Hills timber production.

Hard rock mining in the Black Hills, too, faces an uncertain future. Politically, mining is under the pressure of legitimate environmental concerns, irrational eco-extremism, the federal government's planned increase in mining royalties and the limits of gold reserves in the Northern Hills. Which one will impinge the most by 2012 can only be guessed.

Ellsworth's economic impact on the entire Black Hills region is significant. But as the nature of global conflict and the minds of Congress (perhaps an oxymoron) change, its role in 2012 is equally uncertain. And with Monday's myopic vote in Box Elder, we now have increased that uncertainty.

With little growth opportunity in these areas, what should we do? Encourage the strong and growing.

Among the proposed projects are

a Visitor Information Center on Interstate 90. This will encourage tourists to stop and visit Rapid City. When they stop, they spend money.

The Economic Development Loan Fund will give the city flexibility in attracting new businesses and, I hope, the ability to fund companies started by local entrepreneurs.

The Spirit of the Hills Museum may occupy a unique place. It will, of course, attract tourists and present in dramatic fashion our history and art to those visitors. But it also may become a place for white and Indian Rapid City to meet more often. With so few contacts between us, we need every opportunity.

Others include expanded recreational opportunities for Rapid City residents, recycling and the restoration of Canyon Lake. All will have a real impact on economic vitality and quality of life. And they reflect a consensus of the community.

I may be preaching to the converted but, if not, please vote in favor of the sales tax extension. By preparing now, by investing now, we can build our own future. And demonstrate to new businesses and financial institutions that we are committed to a prosperous future.

No one else is going to do it for us.

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