

Empire News

COASTAL COMMISSION Controversial Pebble Beach project on agenda **B3**

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Urbanists put city back in planning

Designers involved in Gulf Coast rebuilding set sights on Roseland

By **GEORGE LAUER**

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Can hurricane-inflicted lessons learned in Mississippi be put to work in Santa Rosa?

Laura Hall and Lois Fisher, "New Urbanist" designers from Santa Rosa involved in the rebuilding of a town on Mississippi's Gulf Coast, hope so.

"In Mississippi, they talk about Katrina as 'the short hurricane,'" said Hall, recently back from a planning session in Pass Christian, Miss. "They say the long hurricane of sprawl has been slowly destroying the area for years. Now, with the damage from the long hurricane pretty much wiped clean by the short hurricane, they can start from scratch."

Hall and Fisher see a similar opportunity in the Roseland neighborhood of Santa Rosa, which is slated



MARK ARONOFF / The Press Democrat

Lois Fisher, left, and Laura Hall of Fisher and Hall Urban Design work with communities incorporating "New Urbanism" into their projects.

for a major makeover.

"Roseland has managed to avoid most of the effects of the long hurricane because it's been ignored," Hall said.

Because of its demographics and because the region is partly in the city of Santa Rosa and partly in the county, Roseland has not seen much modern development.

"It's not full of soundwalls, subdivisions and strip malls," Hall said. "The people of Roseland have this opportunity to go back to the last time

we had it right in this country — before all planning was done for the automobile."

Hall and Fisher are part of a growing camp of "new urbanist" planners who favor high-density, pedestrian-friendly downtown development as opposed to suburban sprawl.

They have found an unlikely ally in the largest retailer in the world, a company whose name has become synonymous with sprawl — Wal-Mart.

TURN TO **URBAN**, PAGE B3

URBAN: Designers hope to work with Wal-Mart

CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1

Two old-style Wal-Mart stores on the Gulf Coast wiped out by Hurricane Katrina are coming back as new urban models.

Instead of a big box with a vast parking lot in front, the store in town of Pass Christian, where Laura Hall is spearheading the city's redesign process, will be reborn as a large corner store surrounded by smaller shops on the sidewalk level and apartments and condominiums upstairs. A smaller, less visible parking lot is planned behind the store.

"Nobody expects or wants cars to disappear," Fisher said. "That's not going to happen in Mississippi and it's not going to happen here. But we don't have to make them the focal point of our lives, either."

Hall and Fisher, who helped design downtown developments in Petaluma and Windsor, also are helping plan a new community at the former Agilent property in Rohnert Park.

Although their company,

Fisher & Hall Urban Design, has established a working relationship with Wal-Mart, Hall and Fisher are not involved in Wal-Mart's Santa Rosa project.

"But we're certainly willing," Fisher said.

Wal-Mart is battling national public relations damage for lack of health-care coverage and low wages for its workers. Two weeks ago, the city council of Hercules in the East Bay voted to invoke eminent domain to prevent Wal-Mart from building a store near the town waterfront. Three towns in Maine are considering "box-free" planning zones to prevent Wal-Mart from opening in an area of coastal New England known for its colonial charm.

Several states, including California, are considering legislation requiring Wal-Mart to provide more and better health coverage for its workers.

The retailer hopes to counteract some of that negative image with its willingness to re-think building designs. The company has proposed a new

store in Roseland at the site of the former Home Base store at the intersection of Stony Point and Sebastopol roads.

"If it were on Sebastopol Road between Stony Point and Dutton, I'd be more in favor of a walkable design," said Santa Rosa Mayor Jane Bender.

"But where Wal-Mart wants to come in is not a walkable community. It's an old big-box development that doesn't lend itself to pedestrian-friendly development," Bender said. I mean, where are they going to walk to?"

The portion of Sebastopol Road between Stony Point and Dutton is targeted as an "international village," with high-density retail and residential mixed use.

Wal-Mart will give more details on its Roseland proposal 4 p.m. Thursday at a design review board meeting at city hall.

Although Wal-Mart officials aren't ready to talk details about Santa Rosa plans yet, incorporate willingness to entertain new urbanist ideas may come

NEW URBANISM

Who: Laura Hall and Lois Fisher

Company: Fisher & Hall Urban Design, Santa Rosa

PROJECTS

- Central Petaluma
- Pass Christian, Miss.
- Sebastopol Northeast
- Sonoma Mountain Village, Rohnert Park
- Windsor Mill Neighborhood
- San Quentin Prison re-use design

into play.

After meeting with Hall last week at the Congress for New Urbanism in Providence, R.I., Bill Correll, Wal-Mart's director of architecture, wrote, "I am in awe of your work and trust me, I'm listening closely and valuing your recommendations and introductions. Good things will come of all this."

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