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NEA panel gives SR advice

Focus on Old Courthouse Square, not City Hall

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Saturday, July 19, 2008 at 4:30 a.m.

A panel of nationally recognized city design experts urged Santa Rosa to focus its downtown revitalization efforts on Old Courthouse Square and to put aside, for the moment, "distractions" such as the proposal to rebuild City Hall.

That recommendation came during a special forum at Santa Rosa City Hall on Friday afternoon. The event brought to a close a two-day tour of the city by the Mayor's Institute on City Design, a 22-year-old program of the National Endowment for the Arts.

"Your investment is being diffused by looking along the peripheries," said NEA design director Maurice Cox.

Cox said development plans should be limited to a "strict boundary" of about four blocks, with the Old Courthouse Square as the centerpiece.

The reconstruction of a new City Hall, said Cox, "really should not be the distraction of this community at this time."

Cox headed the two-day Santa Rosa tour, which included an examination of current downtown revitalization proposals and meetings with city staff, the City Council, the arts community and other civic leaders.

The team of four experts included: Barbara Wilks, a New York City-based architect and urban designer; David Dixon, head of planning and urban design for Boston-based Goody Clancy; and Chicago architecture critic and urbanist Lee Bey.

Wilks said current plans for reuniting Old Courthouse Square have "a lot of potential" but that a special effort needed to be made to ensure that the space would be utilized daily, not just when special events are held there.

"This is your major statement about yourself," Wilks said of any plans to revamp the historic square.

Cox warned that the local community should not skimp on funding for what could be the city's "emerging living room," adding that the proposed \$13 million to \$14 million budget for the square were not "extraordinary numbers."

The panel's other suggestions included:

Developing more urban uses such as retail shops that face the Prince Memorial Greenway, making it a "second front door" to any revitalized downtown.

Maintaining Santa Rosa Plaza as a pedestrian walkway, possibly developing external retail space in the 40-foot setback between the mall building and B Street.

Bringing together fragmented downtown planning and design efforts.

Creating more downtown housing and urban amenities such as arts programs near Old Courthouse Square.

"Embrace the arts as a catalyst for downtown renaissance," said Dixon, the Boston design expert.

Bey offered a number of funding options for downtown redevelopment, including increasing the hotel/bed tax, the creation of a restaurant tax, a motor vehicle tax and an increase in parking fees.

But he warned that such revenue proposals would only work if downtown stakeholders, including businesses, felt they would truly benefit from revitalization efforts.

During Friday's forum, Cox acknowledged former Mayor Bob Blanchard's involvement with the Mayor's Institute on City Design. Blanchard was committed to seeing downtown Santa Rosa become the "heart of a wonderful community," Cox said.

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