

By Harry Eagar, Staff Writer

A Holistic Town

As ML&P begins designing West Maui project, it considers narrower streets, back alleys, row houses and no strip malls

KAPALUA -- Seldom do developers hear applause for their proposals, but Maui Land & Pineapple Co. did Friday night in the fourth Pulelehua meeting.

But that does not mean it will be simple to turn the proposals into buildings. For one thing, a principle feature of the tentative design calls for a road network that would be classed as substandard by current ordinances.

However, although the ordinances have not changed much recently, there has been some rethinking of what makes for a good road. Planning director Mike Foley, who attended both Friday's meeting and the introductory meeting the previous week, said the administration is prepared to support the proposal to outfit Pulelehua with much narrower streets.

Without making a commitment, Foley said police and fire representatives have been kept in the planning loop and may give way on street widths. According to town planning consultant Victor Dover, narrow streets are a practical component of "traffic calming by design."

Bob McNatt, the ML&P vice president leading the Pulelehua planning, is sold on the concept, especially since the latest country regulations specify speed tables on new residential streets.

According to traffic consultant Rich Hall, narrow streets, especially with curbside parking, force drivers to slow down but do not really impede traffic. Even big ambulances, fire engines and garbage trucks can readily pass.

Among the proposals for the "holistic town" are narrow back alleys for garbage collection. The alleys are also envisaged as pathways that children would use to go to school, to play fields or to the small shops in the town center.

Town planner and project director Amy Groves of Dover, Kohl & Associates spent the past week listening to scores of interested people who came by a Napili Plaza room where architects labored over sketches of possible building styles.

At least 80 Mauians had attended a charette or design workshop two Saturdays ago.

As amateur town planners they sometimes had a difficult time deciding where to begin, says Groves. Starting with a "greenfield" or blank parcel of land is even more challenging than trying to figure out how to revise an area that is already built up.

However, they got down to it, and in their comment cards they made their feelings known. One just said, "Affordable!" Another said, "No strip malls."

Strip malls are not part of the mix, said McNatt, but a complete town is.

By Friday, Dover's staff had some sketches of suggested layouts for a series of neighborhoods that would comprise a town in themselves, and also link (over gulches) to an existing subdivision at Kahana Ridge and a proposed one to the south of Pulelehua on Department of Hawaiian Home Lands property.

The draft sketch shows a green mall up Akahahele Street, the road to Kapalua-West Maui Airport, which would be the main, but not only, intersection with Honoapiilani Highway.

At the makai end of the mall would be some sort of civic structure (possibly a wellness center), with a small commercial street nearby.

A short walk to the south would be a school -- probably the first of two once the entire project is built out.

A grid of narrow streets, with streetscapes adapted to walkers, would honeycomb the 150 or so acres mauka of the airport.

A network, says Dover, avoids the congestion that occurs when every trip has to pass through one node.

Tentative housing designs include small apartment houses with entrance courtyards, two-story buildings that could house a business on the ground floor and the owners above, plantation-style small houses on raised platforms, big and expensive houses and row houses.

The designs mostly reflect looks already familiar on Maui, except the row houses.

"There aren't a lot of good precedents for rowhouses on Maui," Dover admitted. However, he said, there are excellent models from Australia and other South Pacific regions that would fit in.

Other proposed features of phase one of the new town include light industrial buildings mauka of the airport.

The areas at either end of the runway would remain unbuilt. The northern approach might become a community garden and orchard. The southern might be suitable for a couple of sports fields.

The plan calls for corner stores dotted here and there, and a mix of income classes within streets.

Dover flashed a slide of a modest house next to a big house on a street in West Maui. "The world didn't end," he commented. Although at least half the dwellings -- whose number has not been specified -- will meet federal affordability guidelines, the project will also include "big houses," even "mansions."

The core-edge design will produce "highly marketable edge lots," said Dover.

The unaffordable housing will help subsidize the cheaper units.

Not as many people attended Friday's meeting as had come for the first one at the Ritz-Carlton on March 19. But there were at least 150, and when Dover said, "Let's do better than we've ever done," they applauded.

A key feature of the plan is shady streets, and that drew University of Hawaii professor Lee Altenberg to the meeting. Altenberg is interested in restoring native plants to degraded landscapes, and he has a demonstration project in a neglected gulch in Kihei.

Pulelehua was anciently a similar environment, native dry forest, which is now one of the rarest ecosystems in the islands.

Altenberg was curious to know whether native plants fit into ML&P's plans. He came away impressed with the whole concept.

"This is the most concentrated collection of intelligent ideas I've heard since I came to Maui nine years ago," he said.