

health battlefield

10.25-94

BY GAIL FITZER-SCHILLER
Reuters

LOS ANGELES — With national health-care legislation defeated in Congress, the battle for reform has shifted to California, where voters will decide on a ballot proposal that would put the state in full control of health care.

An initiative on the Nov. 8 ballot will ask voters to approve a Canadian-style "single-payer" system that promises health care for all, creates \$40 billion to \$50 billion in new taxes and abolishes private health insurance.

Proposition 186 goes far beyond President Clinton's national reform proposal as well as most other plans rejected by Congress this year. Among the rejected national plans was a single-payer proposal by Rep. Jim McDermott, D-Wash.

Supporters and opponents both believe the battle over the California initiative is wide open just two weeks before the election, although two recent opinion polls indicate that opposition is rising.

Proposition 186 is the only health-care reform initiative on the ballot in any state.

"There was a \$100 million lobbying blitz in Washington that killed health-care reform on the national level, and now they've set their sights on Proposition 186," said Jeff Wagner, a spokesman for Californians for Health Security, the coalition supporting the reform plan.

Proponents say the initiative will provide comprehensive benefits for all Californians, including the state's 6 million uninsured, that surpass those now provided by any insurance company. They say the plan would be financed by a new employer payroll tax of 4.4 percent to 8.9 percent, new income taxes of 2.5 to 5 percent and a cigarette tax of \$1 per pack.

A health commissioner would be elected to oversee the administration of the new health care system. Administrative spending would be capped at 4 percent, plan supporters say.

"It gets rid of private health insurance and the 27 percent profit that lines the pockets of their executives," Wagner said. "It frees up an estimated \$10 billion to \$20 billion a year for providing actual health care services."

But opponents of 186 say the plan is underfinanced despite proposing the largest state tax increase in U.S. history and will increase California's budget deficit by at least \$10 billion in its first year and \$25 billion by 1998.

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(Eds: Adds details, Wilson victory speech, recasts lead)

By Gail Fitzer-Schiller

LOS ANGELES, Nov 8 (Reuter) - Republican Pete Wilson won re-election as California governor Tuesday in a striking political comeback fueled by his support of a victorious ballot proposal cutting off public services to illegal immigrants.

With 33 percent of the votes counted, Los Angeles television channels KNBC and KABC reported that Wilson had a commanding 58 percent to 38 percent lead over Democratic challenger and state treasurer Kathleen Brown.

Brown conceded defeat at 10:15 p.m. PST (1:15 a.m. EST), just about two hours after the polls closed, marking the end of one of the costliest and nastiest gubernatorial races in California history.

"We accept the verdict of the people of California," Brown told supporters at her campaign headquarters. She would have been California's first woman governor.

Just moments later, Wilson declared victory to chants of "four more years" from his supporters. "What you have won today is a victory for working Californians...I must say it wasn't too long ago that the smart money pundits were not only writing me off but they were writing off California."

Wilson, 61, a tough-talking ex-Marine and former senator, trailed Brown by wide margins in the polls until this past June. And two years ago, he had the worst job rating level of any modern California governor.

He presided over the worst economic recession in California since the Depression and faced a barrage of natural and political crises while in office, including the 1992 Los Angeles riots and the January 1994 earthquake.

But Wilson seized upon public resentment of illegal immigration in California, voicing strong support for the ballot proposal called the "Save our State" initiative.

Brown, 49, came out against the proposal, which won by a wide margin in the California election.

Wilson's turnaround has been attributed to his stance on illegal immigration and his calls for tougher measures against crime, which came amid signs of a resurgence in the California economy.

During the campaign, he voiced strong support for the death penalty and a victorious ballot proposal calling for life imprisonment without parole for criminals convicted of three felonies.

With his re-election victory, Wilson not only retains his position as governor but is expected to be in the running for the 1996 Republican presidential or vice presidential nominations.

Brown, who served on the Los Angeles board of education before becoming state treasurer in 1991, had been seeking to follow in the footsteps of her father Pat and brother Jerry. Each had served two terms as California governor -- Pat from 1959 to 1967 and Jerry from 1975 to 1983.

Brown initially seized on Wilson's weak showing in the polls but she failed to maintain an early lead.

Newsday

WORLD/NATION

Menendez Brothers, Trial No. 2

By Rachel Schiller
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Los Angeles — With jury selection in the double murder retrial of Lyle and Erik Menendez under way, prosecutors and defense attorneys are gearing up for another fiery and protracted legal battle, and this time around the prosecution may have the upper hand, legal experts and attorneys involved in the case say.

The retrial is not expected to be broadcast on "Court TV" as before when the case was second only to the O.J. Simpson trial for real-life courtroom dramas.

And while two juries — one for each brother — deadlocked between murder and manslaughter charges in January, 1994, legal experts say the prosecution may have a number of tactical advantages for the second trial on charges that the Menendez brothers shot their parents, Jose and Kitty Menendez, in cold blood to inherit their fortune. The defense claims the brothers were abused by their father for years and feared for their lives at the time of the murders in the family's Beverly Hills home in August, 1989.

Rulings by Van Nuys Superior Court Judge Stanley Weisberg to try the case in front of only one jury and to limit testimony on the abuse that Lyle, 27, and Erik, 24, allegedly suffered at the hands of their father are likely to hamper the defense, the experts say. In addition, the prosecution plans to aggressively attack the abuse defense this time with the help of na-

tionally known forensic psychiatrist Dr. Park Dietz. "It seems to me that a single jury is an appropriate approach and I think it will focus and simplify the task for both sides but I think it might give the prosecution an advantage they didn't have in the first trial," said Robert Pugsley, professor of criminal law at Southwestern University Law School in Los Angeles. With just one jury, evidence against only one of the brothers will either be excluded or be admitted with instructions to the jury to consider it only against that defendant.

Marcia Morrissey, who was on Erik's defense team during the first trial but is no longer on the case, said the prosecution apparently did not take the abuse defense seriously the first time, hoping the jury would dismiss it outright. "This prosecution is kind of going all out to counter what they perceive to be very strong evidence of abuse and I think that will be the difference in the case."

Legal experts say Weisberg's Aug. 1 ruling to restrict the abuse testimony during the retrial sets the stage for endless legal battles between the prosecution and defense over every witness and piece of evidence.

The lead prosecutor, Deputy District Attorney David Conn, said the prosecution has a better chance of getting a murder conviction in the retrial because of Weisberg's ruling.

"We intend to limit the defense a great deal because they presented what has been referred to as an

abuse excuse by which they were able to distract the jury from the real issues in the case. . . . Without that evidence, the jury will be able to focus on the issues that are relevant to this case."

Public defender Terri Towery, co-counsel for Lyle Menendez, said of Weisberg's ruling, "This is from our perspective the most devastating ruling that has occurred in the case. It doesn't do us much good to put on a defense if we can't present much evidence in support of it."

Another potential disadvantage for the defense will be the jurors, all of whom have had access to countless news stories on the Menendez case and possibly two TV movies. Defense attorneys say they will not be able to find a fair and impartial jury, although prosecutors and legal experts disagree.

"I think it's going to be very hard to get truly unbiased jurors who have no impression as to what the result in this case should be," said public defender Charles Gessler, the lead defense attorney for Lyle Menendez.

One of the most significant changes in the prosecution's case is its decision to drop Dr. Jerome Oziel, a psychiatrist who testified that the Menendez brothers confessed the killings to him but whose credibility and character were severely undermined by the defense during cross-examination. The prosecution instead plans to play a tape recording of one of their therapy sessions, in which, prosecutors say, the brothers confessed to killing their parents.

Posted on Mon, Jul. 07, 2003

Sharpton hits Bush on policy

By Gail Schiller
ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOS ANGELES - Civil rights activist and Democratic presidential hopeful Rev. Al Sharpton on Sunday denounced President Bush for invading Iraq without international support and mocked him for failing to find Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden.

At a campaign stop at the First African Methodist Episcopal Church, Sharpton also criticized Bush's policies in Africa and warned against sending American troops to war-torn Liberia without the support of the rest of Africa and the world community.

Sharpton, who also appeared on CBS' "Face the Nation" and CNN during his campaign tour to Los Angeles, said Bush's tax policies have hurt places such as California, exacerbating the state's \$38 billion budget deficit.

"They said they're going to war because of weapons of mass destruction. They can't find the weapons," he said.

"Bush said after Sept. 11 we've got to go and get bin Laden. Yet he can't find bin Laden. He can't find bin Laden, he can't find the weapons. Now we've got to take pride that Saddam Hussein is still alive; we can't find him.

"I promise you if I'm elected, President Bush will not be in charge of the missing persons bureau," Sharpton shouted to cheers, laughter and applause.

Sharpton, who rose to prominence in the 1980s as a New York civil rights activist opposed to police brutality and violence by whites against blacks, is billing himself as a presidential candidate in touch with the needs of urban voters.

Political observers question whether he can capture the nomination, or beat Bush. The Los Angeles Times reported Sunday that Sharpton has raised about \$114,000 in campaign donations, whereas other Democrats have raised millions.

However, Sharpton is popular among black voters, which was evident from the overwhelmingly positive response of churchgoers who gave him a standing ovation on Sunday.

Ollie Guillory, 78, said Sharpton's sermon was "perfect, immaculate, full of so much truth and very motivating." She said she would definitely vote for Sharpton if he ran for president.

Kay Kinkaid, 40, a marketing professional who came to hear Sharpton speak at the South Los Angeles church, said his candidacy is helping to frame political debate.

"I don't think anyone else is bringing up the issues to Congress that he is," she said.



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California wildfires will bring floods, mudslides

Tuesday, November 04, 2003
By Gail Fitzer-Schiller, Reuters

LOS ANGELES — Long after California's raging wildfires have finally been extinguished, they will still be wreaking havoc on the lives of Californians, setting off a dangerous wave flash floods and mudslides.

With firefighters just beginning to make inroads against the biggest-ever wildfires in the state, scientists, forestry officials, and other experts were already warning that residents lucky enough to have escaped the fury of 10 infernos that scorched southern California could fall victim to mudslides, floods, and landslides that will follow in their wake.

"California never just gets a fire," said University of California, Irvine history Professor Mike Davis. "When the rain comes, then you get the mudslides and a further cycle of disasters, maybe not on the same scale, but you almost certainly are going to lose more homes and have more property damage."

When the wildfires scorched more than 750,000 acres of southern California, an area just slightly smaller than the state of Rhode Island, they destroyed all vegetation on mountains and hillsides. Now when heavy rain falls this winter, there will be nothing to stop it from penetrating directly into the soil. In addition, waxy compounds in plants and soil that are released during fires create a natural barrier in the soil that prevents rain water from seeping deep into the ground.

The result is erosion, mudslides, and excess water running off the hillsides, often causing flash flooding in the communities below.

"There is likely to be a lot of flooding that will occur," said Doug Hammond, professor of earth sciences at the University of Southern California. "We will very likely have landslides as a result of this, and the reason that happens is vegetation plays a big role in holding soil together and in slowing runoff of rainfall."

San Bernardino Area Will Be Hit Hardest

The picturesque neighborhoods in the foothills of the San Bernardino Mountains, with their rugged steep slopes, are likely to be the hardest hit of all the areas struck by California's raging infernos.

"The slopes of the San Bernardino mountains have been burned from the bottom all the way up to the plateau with Lake Arrowhead," said Philip Rundel, professor of biology at UCLA's Institute of the Environment.

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Experts said the mudslides and flash flooding could be particularly grave this winter because the vast amount of land scorched leaves so many communities vulnerable.

"The seriousness of it is that we now have vegetation stripped off the mountains in a continuous belt for 40 miles from San Bernardino to San Dimas," said Richard Minnich, professor of earth sciences at the University of California, Riverside. "That means you're going to get high erosion rates over a huge area. I know that when we start getting heavy winter rainstorms, there's going to be an amazing amount of runoff and mud going into adjoining neighborhoods."

The mudslides and flooding could begin as soon as the next few weeks with the first rains of the season, Rundel said.

Experts said that while the flooding and mudslides would be most severe this coming winter, the consequences of the wildfires could be felt for many years to come.

"The problems with slope stability and erosion will last for years," said Davis. "We've never had such a large area burned in southern California.... The consequences of this fire will last for decades at least."

Source: Reuters



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Friday October 31, 03:22 AM

Californians risk lives to live with nature

By Gail Fitzer-Schiller

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - They live on earthquake fault lines, on cliff tops, in the middle of dying forests and far from any source of water and then they wonder why they're struck by earthquakes, fires, mudslides, floods and drought.

You might call it the California way of life.

"I think seismic activity is both the experience and the symbol of California culture which is a very dramatic, artificial imposition of human will on the land, on nature," said state librarian and University of Southern California history professor Kevin Starr.

"We are continuously allowing suburban development to edge into volatile wilderness."

From the cliff tops of Malibu with breathtaking views of the Pacific Ocean to the foothills of the picturesque San Bernardino Mountains, Californians love to live in the midst of the state's scenic nature and wilderness.

And the trend is evident among both the state's wealthiest residents who live in Malibu mansions and the middle class who find cheaper housing in the countryside and rural foothills of the San Bernardino Mountains.

But now with some of the worst wildfires in California history ravaging the southern part of the state, some experts are blaming Californians and their government officials for exacerbating the extent of casualties, damage and even the intensity of some of the natural disasters that strike the state.

By choosing to live on fault lines, on clifftops and in the wilderness Amid dying forests, Californians are taking on too much risk that can jeopardise not only their own lives, but those of others who choose to

REUTERS

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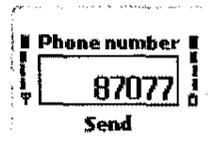
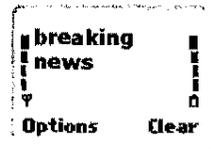
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Californians risk lives to live with nature

live on safer terrain, historians and ecologists say.

And county governments that not only allow development of these precarious areas, but subsidise the risk homeowners take by bailing them out whenever disaster strikes are also at fault, they say.

"It takes both nature and society to produce disasters like this," University of California at Irvine history Professor Mike Davis said of the ferocious wildfires that have killed 20 people, destroyed over 2,000 homes and scorched some 644,000 acres (254,000 hectares) of land.

"If Southern California seems like an apocalyptic theme park it's because we've made it one due to the absence of regional planning, bad land use policies and the political domination of local government by developers," Davis said.

Ecologists say the wildfires raging throughout southern California would never have been this deadly or destructive if previous smaller fires had been able to run their course, burning swatches of forest that would serve as a natural fire break.

SUBURBAN DEVELOPMENT

Because there is so much suburban development Amid the wilderness, California firefighters usually extinguish fires quickly and refrain from a policy of purposely burning brush that acts as fuel for wildfires.

"I think the government's natural reaction is to protect property wherever it is. Unfortunately, in determining those policies, the government does not take into adequate account the increased risk they put people in urban areas by suppressing fires in the back country," said Professor Richard Carson, chairman of the economics department at the University of California, San Diego.

Whatever risks they take in choosing where they live, Californians rely on the government to bail them out and help pay the cost of rebuilding their homes.

In fact, most of the residents whose homes have been scorched by wildfires in the past week have vowed to rebuild and return to their communities. Even some who lost their homes for a second time to California infernos have pledged to rebuild.

"These incursions into these volatile areas involve the assumption of enormous public subsidies. The people of California have determined they want to live in a condition of subsidised risk," said Starr.

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Daniel Pearl remembered as man who will defeat killers in death

By Gail Schiller
ASSOCIATED PRESS

0:43 a.m., February 21, 2003

LOS ANGELES – In an interfaith memorial service marking the anniversary of his death, slain Wall Street journal reporter Daniel Pearl was remembered as a man whose quest for the truth and faith in humanity would defeat his killers' goals and bring people of diverse beliefs together in a battle against hatred.

Nearly 350 people including diplomats from Pakistan and nine other countries attended Thursday's service at the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance to mark the first anniversary of Pearl's murder by Pakistani terrorists. It was the first of several memorial services scheduled in major cities around the world, including New York, Toronto, London, Paris and Jerusalem.

"The global outpouring of sadness and sympathy that accompanied Daniel's death forged a wide-reaching network of human solidarity," Daisaku Ikeda, president of one of the world's largest Buddhist organizations, Soka Gakkai International, said in a statement read at the service. "This is a force for good beyond the power of any hate-filled individual or group to destroy."

Pearl was kidnapped in Karachi, Pakistan, in January 2002 while researching links between Pakistani extremists and terrorist Richard C. Reid, who was later convicted of trying to blow up a trans-Atlantic flight with explosives hidden in his shoe. A grisly videotape received last Feb. 21 by U.S. diplomats in Karachi showed Pearl dead. Four militants, including British-born Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, were convicted of his murder in July.

Chief of the Journal's South Asia bureau, Pearl was raised in Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley and attended Stanford University before embarking upon his journalism career. He was married and his wife was expecting their first child when he was killed at the age of 38.

"This tragedy really wakes up the moral consciousness of all people who love God. Life is sacred and no one has a right to take it," said Mohammed Khan, delivering a statement from Sheik Tajuddin Shuaib, the Imam of the King Fahd Mosque in Culver City.

Pearl's father, Judea Pearl, said the interfaith services around the world would show his son's murderers that their anti-Semitic crime had brought people of different religions together. "We are telling Danny's killers: You will not succeed. Humanity will triumph.

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"Hatred killed our son and hatred we will fight for the rest of our lives with vengeance and tenacity. The hate that killed Danny also created new opportunities to fight hate," he said.

Pakistani Consul General Raana Rahim told the gathering that the people of Pakistan were "deeply grieved" by Pearl's killing, adding that her country is a "front-line coalition partner in the fight against terrorism" because it firmly believes the world must unite to defeat terrorism.

"I think Daniel would have been happy if he realized that his death, if anything, would help to build greater understanding between people," she said.

In recognition of Pearl's love of music, the memorial included performances by The Children of the World Choir and a violinist who played the traditional Klezmer music of Eastern European Jews.

Pearl's memorial service followed the Jewish custom of *yahrzeit*, which literally means remembrance and calls for prayer, reciting psalms, studying the Bible and other customs to preserve the memory of the deceased on the anniversary of their death.

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New Year's revelers still planning Las Vegas trips
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By Gail Fitzer-Schiller

LOS ANGELES, Dec 26 (Reuters) - New Year's revelers planning to celebrate the holiday in Las Vegas are not canceling plans despite a heightened U.S. terror alert and a Christmas scare that grounded six flights from Paris to Los Angeles, booking agents and analysts said on Friday.

The disruptions to air travel that followed the Sept. 11, 2001, hijacking attacks hit Las Vegas casinos hard, in part because the city depends so heavily on tourists who arrive by plane.

But business on the Las Vegas Strip has been recovering in recent months. Neither this week's heightened security alert nor a report that Las Vegas might have been a target for attack appears to have unnerved travelers bound for the desert gambling resort, analysts said.

"We spent a lot of time researching this issue today and so far there really doesn't appear to be any trend toward increased cancellations," said Jason Ader,

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chief executive officer of Hayground Cove Asset Management and a former gaming analyst for Bear Stearns.

"From what we can tell, people who planned to go to Vegas still plan to go. Most people feel pretty relieved any such attack was thwarted and have a high level of confidence that things should be OK in the future," Ader said.

He said his firm's research was based on a proprietary survey of travel agents around the country.

Park Place Entertainment Corp. (nyse: PPE - news - people), which owns such Las Vegas Strip mainstays as Caesars, the Flamingo and Bally's, has not seen widespread cancellations due to concerns about security, spokesman Robert Stewart said.

"Our Las Vegas properties are at or above capacity for the New Year's holiday. We have had a few individual people who have expressed some concerns about traveling to Las Vegas at this time, but those cases were few and far between," he said.

Other major Las Vegas casino operators include Harrah's Entertainment Inc. (nyse: HET - news - people), MGM Mirage (nyse: HET - news - people) and Mandalay Resort Group. (nyse: HET - news - people)

There are about 125,000 hotel rooms on the Las Vegas Strip. The New Year's holiday is typically one of the busiest times of the year.

The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority said it had received over 100 calls just from 6 a.m. to 10 a.m. Friday morning from people interested in booking hotel rooms for the New Year's

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holiday and conventions in January -- about normal for this time of year.

Spokeswoman Marina Nicola said the organization had not yet received any calls from tourists seeking to cancel their New Year's reservations or expressing concerns about Las Vegas being a target for terrorists.

"The people who are calling are more concerned about where they're going to stay for New Year's and next month's conventions," she said.

The Las Vegas Tourist Bureau, a private company that makes reservations for visitors to Las Vegas at most of the city's major hotels, also said it had not received any cancellations.

Last Sunday, Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge placed the nation on heightened alert, saying threat indicators were "perhaps greater now than at any point" since Sept. 11, 2001, and stressed the need to guard against "al Qaeda's continued desire to carry out attacks" against the United States.

On Wednesday, U.S. officials asked Air France to cancel six flights from Paris to Los Angeles because of what they called a "credible threat" that emerged when passenger manifests were compared with an intelligence "watch list."

Fears of an attack eased somewhat on Friday after checks by French intelligence found no links to radical groups among passengers booked to fly on the six canceled flights on Dec. 24 and 25.

The Washington Post on Friday quoted U.S. government officials as saying the only big city on the Paris-Los Angeles route that hijackers would consider a "nice, attractive target" was Las Vegas. The same report quoted officials as saying that Los Angeles could also have been the intended target.

Ridge told CNN on Friday that the government had no knowledge of a specific threat to Las Vegas.

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Posted on Mon, Jul. 28, 2003

L.A. concert hall part of revitalization

By Gail Schiller
ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOS ANGELES - With a dramatic, curved steel exterior that looks more like sculpture than architecture, and acoustics it is hoped will be among the best in the world, the Walt Disney Concert Hall is being counted on to provide much more than a new home for the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

When the \$274-million, Frank Gehry-designed building opens this fall, local government officials and business leaders are banking on it becoming an immediate icon.

They see it as an edifice that can set apart the downtown skyline, revitalize an aging urban area and at the same time move Los Angeles toward becoming a cultural hub that is the rival of New York or any other city.

"It's going to be a great boost to classical music, to the Philharmonic, to Los Angeles, to downtown and to the region," said Zev Yaroslavsky, who has been involved in the project since his election to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors in 1994.

The Board of Supervisors donated the 3.6-acre downtown site on which the concert hall sits, but it was a joint effort by business and government that brought the project to fruition.

Billionaire philanthropist Eli Broad and his family, for example, donated \$10 million. Broad, who is co-chairman of the Grand Avenue Committee that is spearheading a downtown redevelopment effort, sees the hall as being the centerpiece of a revitalization that will bring restaurants, shops, offices, residences and perhaps even a smaller version of New York City's Central Park to the area.

"We will wind up with a small Central Park or Boston Commons" where people from all over the city could come together to celebrate New Year's Eve, the Fourth of July and other holidays, Broad said.

The open area would result from restoring and expanding a 16-acre park that would run from City Hall to the adjacent Los Angeles County Music Center.

The hall, meanwhile, is expected to become the city's signature building, pulling in tourists who simply want a look at the latest work by Gehry, arguably the most acclaimed architect of his time.

"It's just spectacular," said Mayor James Hahn. "It's a one-of-a-kind building, and I think people just love the excitement of it. I think it will be a real landmark for our city."

Not that the odd-looking building by Gehry, who takes a modern artist's approach to architecture, is everyone's cup of tea.

"It's controversial. A lot of people aren't going to like it ... but architecturally, I think it's a masterpiece both outside and inside," said Yaroslavsky.

Gehry designed the wavy, steel exterior of the 293,000-square-foot concert hall to look like a ship with its

sail at full mast, saying he wanted to create the feeling of traveling along a ceremonial barge to music.

The centerpiece of the concert hall, a 2,265-seat auditorium with natural lighting in which the audience surrounds the orchestra, was designed to look and feel like the hull of a ship. The auditorium's curved wood ceiling is also meant to evoke the feeling of billowing sails.

In contrast to the harsh steel exterior, the auditorium and many of the smaller performance areas in the four-story concert hall are filled with the warmth of wood on floors, walls and ceilings, an important element, experts say, in achieving high-quality acoustics.

Indeed, Gehry has said that no matter how impressive the building's appearance, he will not have succeeded if the sound isn't the best it can be when resident maestro Esa-Pekka Salonen steps to the podium to lead the Philharmonic.

"It is my dream that when Esa-Pekka raises his baton to conduct the first notes on opening night, the building will be his instrument, that he will be at the same time conducting the inside and outside of the building itself in a wonderful symphony," Gehry said recently.

In designing the hall and planning for the installation of a stunning 10,000-pipe organ in its main auditorium, Gehry collaborated with world renowned acoustic experts Yasuhisa Toyota and Minoru Nagata. The organ debut is scheduled one year after the hall's opening in October.

The Philharmonic is planning to present more than 150 concerts a year at the Disney Hall beginning with the 2003-2004 season.

At the Disney Hall, much more than music will be on display.

Many areas reflect a second theme of gardens, in deference to Walt Disney's widow, Lillian, who initiated the project in 1987 with a \$50 million donation in honor of her late husband's love of symphonic music. She died in 1997 at 98.

The Disney family's contribution, including accumulated interest, eventually swelled to \$100 million, and the Walt Disney Co. gave \$25 million more. The state of California donated \$15 million to the project, and numerous other corporate donors made seven-figure contributions.

The carpet throughout the hall, also designed by Gehry, is called "Lillian" and depicts a garden in full bloom. The same pattern is found on all the seats in the main auditorium. The donor's room is designed as an inverted tulip, and wood pillars throughout the main lobby area are sculpted to depict large tree trunks.

A 38,000-square-foot rooftop garden, billed as an urban park, contains trees from different neighborhoods of Los Angeles. A porcelain fountain in the shape of a rose -- Lillian Disney's favorite flower -- is its centerpiece.

Government officials and business leaders are counting on it all to help resurrect an area of downtown that for decades has rolled up its sidewalks after dark and on weekends. The area is beginning to show signs of life, however.

The imposing Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, home to the Los Angeles Catholic Archdiocese, was completed just blocks away last year. About a mile away is the downtown Staples Center, which opened in 1999 and whose tenants include basketball's Los Angeles Lakers and Clippers and hockey's Los Angeles Kings.

All of those structures, and others, are seen as key to bringing people into the area.

About 41,000 people live downtown, and that number is expected to rise to 60,000 by 2004, according to developer James Thomas, chief executive of Thomas Properties Group. He said 9,000 residential units are either under construction or in the planning stages.

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Britney Arranges Annulment Hours After Wedding

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By Gail Fitzer-Schiller

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - Pop star Britney Spears (news) made arrangements to annul her Las Vegas marriage to childhood friend Jason Allen Alexander just hours after the two were wed in a chapel there on Saturday, friends and relatives said on Sunday.

George Maloof Jr., owner of the Palms Casino and Hotel, where Spears was staying over the New Year's Eve holiday and weekend, confirmed Spears and Alexander, both 22, were wed around 5 a.m. PST (8 a.m. EST/1300 GMT) on Saturday at a Las Vegas wedding chapel. He declined further comment.

However, a friend of Spears who spoke on the condition of anonymity, told Reuters that by late Saturday afternoon, all the annulment papers had been signed by both Spears and Alexander in the presence of an attorney, a notary public, Spears' brother Brian, her manager Larry Rudolph and Maloof.

The annulment papers were expected to be filed when the courts open on Monday morning, the friend said.

Alexander's grandmother, Betty Alexander, also confirmed the marriage and annulment. "Yes, they got married and they are in the process of getting it annulled," she told Reuters by phone from Alexander's hometown of Kentwood, Louisiana.

There were apparently no hard feelings. Shortly after the annulment papers were signed, the couple on Saturday night had dinner at the N9NE Steakhouse at the Palms Casino and Hotel.

On Saturday morning, Spears was escorted down the aisle at the Little White Wedding Chapel in the city known for quickie marriages -- and divorces -- by a Palms Casino Hotel bellman, who doubled as the couple's limousine driver for their impromptu nuptials, Spears' friend said.

BRIDE WORE A BASEBALL CAP

The only people who witnessed the wedding were the chapel's minister, a photographer and the bellman. The wedding ceremony was videotaped, but no video has so far been released.

The bride wore a baseball cap, jeans and a T-shirt for her first marriage. The groom was dressed casually for what was his first marriage as well.

After spending Friday night at a movie in the Palms' theater and in their hotel suite, Spears and Alexander showed up in the hotel's Ghostbar to ask for a driver.

After stopping at two other chapels that were closed, the couple found their way to the Little White Wedding Chapel. They were told they needed a marriage license, so at about 4 a.m. PST (7 a.m. EST/1200 GMT) they drove to the courthouse, Spears' friend said.

A marriage license was indeed filed in Clark County, Nevada, on Jan. 3, for Alexander and Spears.

Signed by both, the document says they are both residents of Kentwood, Louisiana, and have never been married before.

The pop princess, a one-time children's television performer turned teen-aged sex symbol who most recently has posed scantily clad on magazine covers and kissed Madonna (news - web sites) on national television while promoting her latest album.

Spears' close friend said the pop diva was publicly seen kissing both Alexander and one of her female dancers while dancing to her new song "Toxic" at the hotel's Rain nightclub on Thursday night. "It made her kiss with Madonna look mild," the friend said.

The pop diva's most high-profile romance previously was with fellow pop idol Justin Timberlake (news), now enjoying a successful solo career after years with the boy band 'N Sync (news - web sites).

Spears shot to superstardom as a teen-ager with her debut album "...Baby One More Time." She released her latest, "In the Zone," in November, storming to No. 1 on the music charts with the aid of a publicity blitz. It was the singer's fourth consecutive No. 1 debut.

Spears will tour to promote "In the Zone" in 2004