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Federal Offices May Go To St. E's

Homeland Security Needs Massive Site

By Eric M. Weiss
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Federal officials are looking to move some of the Department of Homeland Security offices to the St. Elizabeths Hospital campus in Southeast Washington, a plan that would create a massive federal facility and possibly relocate thousands of regional employees.

Federal agencies could eventually occupy as much as 4.5 million square feet on the west campus of St. Elizabeths, a historic site with breathtaking views of downtown, according to the General Services Administration and city officials involved in the effort. In comparison, the Pentagon has a floor area of 6.5 million square feet.

The plan would create the largest new federal facility in the District since the 3 million-square-foot Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center, on Pennsylvania Avenue, opened in 1998.

Homeland Security has publicly announced only that one of its divisions, the U.S. Coast Guard, is moving to St. Elizabeths. The plan is to build a 1.3 million-square-foot, \$330 million Coast Guard headquarters there by 2010.

Homeland Security has roughly 5 million square feet of offices in 61 locations in the metropolitan area, some in leased private buildings or in facilities that would not meet current security requirements, according to federal officials and commercial brokers.

The department may be following in the steps of the Defense Department. Last year, a military base-closing commission voted to move thousands of defense-related workers out of leased commercial office space and onto secure military bases.

"Because we can provide a secure environment, they are looking at, over time, relocating components of DHS," a GSA spokesman who spoke on condition of anonymity said, referring to the St. Elizabeths site. "DHS itself is still in the process of figuring out what components to locate there."

It remains unclear, for example, whether Homeland Security's current headquarters, off Nebraska Avenue NW, would move.

City officials said they are participating in the planning process but have reservations about the size of the project and its impact on the surrounding community. The 176-acre site, which is owned by the federal government, is between Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and the Anacostia Freeway and just south of the Frederick Douglass Memorial Bridge. The eastern part of the hospital campus is owned by the District and still includes a working mental hospital.

"Our concern has been about whether the amount of square footage could fit on the property, given the constraints of historic preservation," said Rosa Lynn, an assistant director in the city's office of planning, referring to the 61 landmark Civil War-era buildings there.

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There are also questions about whether the area's infrastructure could support so many workers.

"If we're filling 4.5 million square feet of space, getting people in and out is a concern," Lynn said. But she acknowledged that the District has little leverage because of the federal government's ownership.

"They are moving forward," she said. "As far as we know, they are wanting to do this and moving to get it done."

Russ Knocke, DHS spokesman, would not confirm that the department will consolidate at the St. Elizabeths site, saying only that the department is in the market for 6.5 million square feet. He also would not discuss whether the need to create a secure area would be a factor in a move to St. Elizabeths.

"The department's intention is to work closely with GSA to identify space requirements and possible locations that would be appropriate," he said. "We provide the GSA with our space requirements; it proposes possible solutions."

A spokeswoman for Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.) said it has not been announced officially that the entire secure campus will be exclusively for DHS.

The west campus of St. Elizabeths is perhaps the city's most extraordinary tract of unused land. It also presents a development challenge for the federal government, because every inch is a national landmark, covered by the same level of historic protection as the White House.

In 2002, the hospital was named one of the 11 most-endangered places by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

A GSA spokesman said that under the proposal, the 61 historic buildings that remain, which total 1.1 million square feet, would be restored and adapted for new uses as meeting space, an auditorium, a health club and an operations center. City officials have also pushed for retail space on Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue and public access to historic city overlooks.

While the federal government decides how to use the west side of the campus, the possibility of losing more federal tenants could send shudders throughout the region. In Northern Virginia, officials are still reeling from the decisions by the military base-closing commission.

For example, in Arlington County, Homeland Security leases more than 400,000 square feet in the old MCI headquarters for the Transportation Security Administration. The county also is home to the Homeland Security Institute, the Homeland Security Advanced Research Projects Agency and the US-Visit program.

Terry Holzheimer, Arlington's director of economic development, said he did not know the details of any DHS consolidation plans.

Outside the historic red-brick walls of the St. Elizabeths campus, neighborhood activists are worried about a place they once hoped would be adapted for educational or employment uses.

Eugene DeWitt Kinlow, a Ward 8 community leader, said he fears that a large DHS presence would turn the campus into "a federal enclave -- a secure island."

"With all the heightened security," he said, "the campus will once again be a black hole, where nothing can penetrate to take advantage of views, no housing and, frankly, no jobs there that could support the community."

Staff writer Dana Hedgpeth contributed to this report.

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