



The Prospects (Revisited) for the St. Elizabeths Hospital Campus: Opportunity Lost?

by David F. Garrison¹

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ABSTRACT

The federal government proposes to redevelop the 176-acre West Campus of St. Elizabeths Hospital, a Southeast Washington DC national historic landmark, for the exclusive use of the US Department of Homeland Security as its new headquarters. The General Services Administration has presented a plan for a series of office buildings, nearly three-quarters the capacity of the Pentagon in scale. The West Campus comprises the largest single redevelopment parcel in the city and is located in the poorest section of the town.

The challenge for the city is to persuade the federal planners that the redevelopment of St. Elizabeths needs to enhance the surrounding neighborhood and the District as a whole. This will require working with GSA to modify its vision for the West Campus to reduce the scale and density of the plan so that clear economic and community benefit flow from the project and core aspects of the national landmark remain intact.

A proposal to house the federal Department of Homeland Security on the 176-acre West Campus of the St. Elizabeths Hospital in a complex of high security office buildings could irreversibly wall off this important asset from the rest of the city. The large compound is a National Historic Landmark, the highest designation for historic property, on a par with the US Capitol. If this happens, this large, strategically-placed parcel with its spectacular views will represent a major lost opportunity for the District.

Founded in 1852 by Dorothea Dix, St. Elizabeths Hospital was for a time the nation’s premiere public health facility. By the middle of the last century, the hospital was treating 7,000 in-patients and employed 4,000. It was operating on 350 acres in over 100 buildings spread across the east and west sides of what is now Martin Luther King Boulevard (MLK) in the Congress Heights neighborhood of Ward 8, east of the Anacostia River. In 1987, the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) transferred the so-called East Campus and the entire St. Elizabeths Hospital to the District, a grant that included 174 acres and some 40 buildings.

In January 2001, HHS notified the General Services Administration (GSA) that the St. Elizabeths West Campus, with its 61 mostly historic buildings, was no longer needed by the department and should be put into the federal surplus



property disposition process. GSA began that process while HHS completed some environmental remediation work and began mothballing the buildings. GSA took custody of the West Campus in December 2004. Soon thereafter, with 9/11 still a fresh memory, the newly formed Department of Homeland Security (DHS) asked the GSA to find appropriate space for the agency to co-locate the bulk of its sensitive headquarters functions in a single secure setting. GSA decided that the St. Elizabeths West Campus would best meet DHS's needs.

For many years, local officials and citizens have extolled the potential of the entire St. Elizabeths campus (East and West combined) to become a new and exciting mixed-use, mixed-income neighborhood east of the Anacostia River. Development of this new neighborhood right in the middle of Ward 8 could clearly boost the renewal of the surrounding area and benefit both the city and the region. Instead, the West Campus, which includes historic buildings, a remarkable Civil War cemetery, and fine views of the city from the western most bluff (called the Point) high above the Anacostia River, is slated to disappear behind an impenetrable security perimeter in a way that will make employee forays from the compound into the surrounding neighborhood unlikely.

Quadrupling the West Campus Square-footage

The scale of what GSA and DHS propose to do with the West Campus is impressive. DHS headquarters and sub-agency functions are currently scattered across 85 buildings in 54 locations. By 2020, DHS estimates it will require 8 million square feet of office space to accommodate all of the department's activities. The current array of buildings on the West Campus has a bit over 1 million square feet of space. The GSA/DHS planning team proposes to retain and adaptively reuse much of the existing office space while demolishing about half of the 55 buildings that now contribute to the historic character of the property. To that remaining capacity, the federal planners propose to add another 3.5 million square feet of new construction. This would require the siting of perhaps a score or more large new buildings. The result would be a total of 4.5 million square feet of office space (for comparison sake, the Pentagon occupies 6.5 million square feet). There would also be 1.8 million square feet of parking, making a grand total of 6.3 million gross square feet on the 176-acre parcel. In the end, only slightly more than half of DHS space needs in the Washington region would be accommodated at St. Elizabeths.

DHS estimates that 14,000 employees would work on site. While there would be significant 24-hour operations on the campus required by the homeland security mission, something like 90 percent of the workers would commute back and forth in a fairly typical "8-5," Monday through Friday mode. DHS is planning for a parking-space-to-worker ratio of 1:3. The DC Office of Planning would rather see a ratio closer to 1:4 which would require a greater reliance on public transportation. The bulk of parking would be housed in decks set at the foot of the bluff near Rt. 295 with a shuttle bus system to distribute workers around the sprawling campus.

All buildings being used by DHS on the West Campus would be set back from the nearest public space (such as Martin Luther King Avenue) or adjacent residential property by a minimum of 100 feet. Fortunately, most of the existing structures on the campus already meet this requirement. The existing brick wall along the MLK Avenue side of the West Campus does not meet current security needs and would have to be augmented with other more sturdy barriers. GSA plans call for a double fence system for maximum security.

GSA is working with the DC Department of Transportation to arrange for the funding and construction of a dedicated and, one supposes, secure on-off ramp from Rt. 295 (a model for this might be the dedicated CIA headquarters exit and entrance to the George Washington Memorial Parkway in Northern Virginia). This roadway would permit most DHS employees driving to work to progress onto and off the West Campus without traversing existing city streets. For those employees coming by Metro rail, DHS envisions a shuttle system to get workers back and forth from the Congress Heights Green Line Metro stop located on the other side of the East Campus. Presumably the existing tunnel beneath MLK Avenue would be used to avoid shuttle buses having to cross the Avenue at grade. Metro buses would be able to drop off and pick up passengers on MLK Avenue immediately outside the gates to the West Campus complex.

With encouragement from DC Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton who has stressed the importance of retaining major federal headquarters within city limits, Congress appears to generally support the DHS move to the West Campus. The first DHS agency needing replacement space is the Coast Guard, currently occupying a leased building at Buzzard's Point. The lease on that facility expires in May 2008 and will be extended only for a short time. Considerable work upgrading the building is needed if the Coast Guard is to remain there much longer. Elements of the Coast Guard objected to being moved to the West Campus. This resistance translated into a demand by congressional appropriators that approval of the move be postponed until GSA presented a more comprehensive and detailed site plan beyond providing the Coast Guard with new quarters. GSA hopes to present this information to the Congress soon.

GSA and DHS estimate the total cost of the project would be \$3.26 billion, 60 percent of which would be funded through GSA and 40 percent through DHS accounts. Assuming that construction begins in 2009, the Coast Guard would move to its new quarters in 2013 while the balance of the DHS activity slated for the West Campus would arrive in the 2015–2018 period. Given the vagaries and challenges involved in renovating historic structures, especially ones in as poor condition as are many of the key buildings on the West Campus, careful management of the construction process will be required if the actual costs for this large and complex project are to match these estimates.

A Missed Chance of Consequence

Why is the prospect of shutting off the entire St. Elizabeths West Campus from its surroundings a lost opportunity? Consider these points:

- It is rare for a major American city to have the chance to recast the future for such a large and well-placed parcel as the St. Elizabeths West Campus (176 acres). None of the other major development projects planned or underway in the District are quite the scale of the West Campus—not the Southwest Waterfront (47 acres) or the area around the new stadium development (60 acres); not the new Hill East community (aka Reservation 13, south of RFK Stadium; 67 acres) or Poplar Point on the east bank of the Anacostia at the South Capitol Street bridge (110 acres); and not the McMillan Sand Filtration Site at North Capitol Street and Michigan Avenue (25 acres). Sheer scale alone argues for public expectations of real benefit and thus a strong role for the city in the planning of the property's reuse.

- While several of the major projects just listed hold great promise in opening up large swaths of the city's waterfront to public access and use, none rival the vantage point that the St. Elizabeths West Campus has from the Point overlooking most of the city, the confluence of the area's two rivers, and a significant chunk of Northern Virginia. It is an unparalleled spot in the nation's capital whose sweeping vista should not be removed from public access.
- The economic argument for retaining federal employment in the District has validity only if the federal employees in question either live in the District or eat and shop there. Although the home address file for the DHS employees whose offices would be transferred to the St. Elizabeths West Campus is not public, it is likely that the vast majority of them live outside the District. Indeed, the District's Planning Office estimates that only 17% of DHS employees live in the city. This means that, under the rules set by Congress, the salaries earned by the more than four-fifths of the West Campus workers would not be subject to District income tax. Employees, most of them suburbanites, coming each day to work at this site would arrive either by car via the proposed ramp from Rt. 295, by Metro bus with drop off at the front gate on Martin Luther King Avenue, or by Metro rail and DHS shuttle bus. At lunch time, the likely array of government cafeterias on site would make leaving the campus unnecessary. All in all, the economic impact on neighborhood commercial establishments nearby could well be next to nothing. Meanwhile, District police, fire, transportation, and public works departments would be expected to provide regular services, courtesy of the District taxpayers. Although 100% federal funding of the cost of building the dedicated exit ramp from Rt. 295 will no doubt be the city's objective, it seems inevitable that the DC Department of Transportation will be faced with having to absorb some of the related infrastructure expenses on the public streets and sidewalks leading to the West Campus. Given the lack of economic benefit of the project to the District, it would be doubly important for the federal side to pick up the full tab for all related infrastructure and public service support costs.
- The St. Elizabeths parcel sits in the midst of the most distressed and, until recently, most forgotten section of the city. Although the past decade has seen significant reinvestment in the two wards east of the river, Ward 8 in general and Congress Heights in particular continue to have large concentrations of poor residents, badly performing public schools, high rates of violent crime, bad health outcomes, and a range of other discouraging conditions. Given these challenges, can we really countenance letting the unique resource that is the St. Elizabeths West Campus disappear behind high security walls with no benefit to the surrounding community?
- What is to become of the East Campus? Back before 9/11, the expectation of all parties was that the entire St. Elizabeths footprint – all 356 acres of it – would be renovated and developed under a single, comprehensive plan overseen and guided by a local entity. As such, this would have provided the city with the opportunity to closely coordinate and integrate the schemes for the two sides of the original parcel, and to leverage the result so

that it helped grow local jobs and businesses and minimized impacts on traffic and parking. If the West Campus planning is to go its own way, can the District form a sensible strategy for the East Campus when all along its frontage on MLK Avenue the District's property will face a formidable barrier of walls, security fences, and check-points?

- Under the GSA/DHS plan, billions of federal dollars would have to be spent renovating dozens of existing buildings to historic as well as modern office standards. This is in addition to the billions more that would be spent on more dozens of newly constructed office buildings scattered around the West Campus. Yet none of the result would be visible to the public. There must be a way for such publicly funded development to accommodate some level of public access, at least to views of the main historic structures and monuments as well as the spectacular scenic vista over the river.

The Pushback

Surely there is a way to scale back the GSA and DHS plans so that the national historic landmark features of the site are not destroyed and federal plans are otherwise modified so that some benefits of consequence flow to the city. Indeed, an impressive array of federal and local agencies and organizations have been trying hard the past two years, in various ways, to persuade GSA and DHS to consider changing plans. Two statutory processes have provided platforms for these critiques.

- The National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) requires federal agencies “to the maximum extent possible” (Section 110(f)) to minimize the harm federal activities would have on historic properties. Since the entire St. Elizabeths campus, including both East and West portions, has national landmark status, this means that many of the buildings, the grounds, and the “view lines” are all subject to impact reviews under NHPA.
- The National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) requires that federal agencies prepare environmental impact statements on activities which would significantly affect the quality of the human environment. The act also requires that alternative locations be considered.

Arrayed around these two mandated review processes, which are essentially playing out simultaneously, are a group of agencies and organizations including the following:

US Department of the Interior (including the National Park Service)
 National Capital Planning Commission
 US Commission on Fine Arts
 Advisory Council for Historic Preservation
 District Office of Planning (including the DC State Historic Preservation Office)
 St. Elizabeths Hospital (DC Department of Mental Health)
 National Trust for Historic Preservation
 National Coalition to Save Our Mall

Friends of St. Elizabeths
Cultural Landscape Foundation
Ward 8's Advisory Neighborhood Commissions

Not surprisingly, issues and concerns raised by this impressive list of interested parties cover a wide range. Yet all of these so-called “Consulting Parties” concur on the overall point that the scale of the GSA/HHS plan exceeds by more than 100 percent the actual capacity the site can and should provide, considering its unique historic status. They argue that limiting the total renovation and new construction build-out to a combined level of approximately 2.5 million gross square feet of office and parking (less than half of DHS’ expressed needs) would be much more acceptable. The groups concur that the density the federal agencies propose and the need to intermingle newly constructed office buildings among existing historic structures, not to mention filling up much of the carefully designed landscape, will effectively destroy the national landmark.

Beyond this bottom line worry, some of the Consulting Parties are focused on the intricacies of the historic preservation requirements, how they should be applied to the many buildings in question, and, indeed, how many of the existing structures actually have to be renovated as opposed to those which can be demolished. Other parties are worried about the impact which locating this many newly constructed buildings would have on the West Campus landscape so carefully and beautifully designed by successions of superintendents and designers over 150 years. Still others concentrate on the preservation of the marvelous views both outward from the campus and from the west banks of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers back toward the complex. And others ponder the increased risk to this residential section of the city posed by bringing in such a high profile national security target.

Local planning bodies are urging the federal planners to find ways to encourage pedestrian and vehicular movement off the West Campus during the day for lunch and incidental shopping needs which would provide an important boost to nearby commercial establishments, whether existing or prospective. Just a short distance from the West Campus, Giant Food is building a large store on the former Camp Sims parcel along Alabama Avenue. A quantity of strip commercial stores will be located adjacent to the new Giant. Many of these businesses will employ local residents. Expanded commercial activity generated by the presence of 14,000 federal employees could serve to enhance the number of these job prospects. What incentives could be created to encourage patronage by DHS workers of such nearby businesses?

One answer may lie in what happens across the street. The District’s planners are actively working on what will happen to the equally large East Campus now that the general direction of federal plans for the West Campus development is known. With the Metro stop located on the East Campus and thus the projected flow of DHS employees in and out of that station each workday, there may be opportunities for some useful synergy between the East and West campus plans. To GSA’s credit, it says identifying such links is on the table. The fact that the walking distances from the Congress Heights Metro to the far reaches of the West Campus are sufficient to require an employee shuttle bus could provide a starting point for a broader transportation circulation system collaboration between DHS and the District, moving both employees and visitors throughout the East and West Campuses as well as to and from nearby commercial areas.

Integrating a Federal Enclave into the Community

All other things equal, it would be vastly better from the standpoint of the city if the plan for the St. Elizabeths West Campus returned to its earlier target as a place for a mixed use, mixed income, open and accessible new neighborhood. This renewed vision for the site would be warmly received by the agencies and organizations who have participated in the project review. The neighborhood and the city as a whole would also welcome the revitalization of a landmark that would bring benefit and beauty to the public. This alternative scheme would, however, require GSA to dramatically change directions by finding an alternative site for Homeland Security. No doubt the imperative the federal government feels to create highly secure settings for its most vulnerable functions is strong. It may be that seeking a compromise with the federal planners is the more achievable goal, although any compromise would require a substantially scaled-down version of the current development proposal.

Beyond insisting upon at least a modicum of coordinated site and traffic planning among the various federal and city authorities, what else can usefully be done at this stage to integrate the proposed federal enclave into the surrounding community?

- Most importantly, GSA and DHS should scale back the overall amount of office and parking space sought to be placed above ground on the West Campus. Some of the yawning gap between the federal government and the Consulting Parties could be addressed by placing more office and parking functions below ground, an admittedly more expensive building option. Might it also be possible that some of the core DHS functions seeking inclusion in this consolidated headquarters scheme could be located across the street on the East Campus or elsewhere nearby in Congress Heights or even perhaps in the Poplar Point development now being planned by the city? This suggestion about the East Campus presumes that the District could accommodate some federal uses as part of its plan for this equally critical property. And it would probably require that functions placed on the East Campus be able to operate in a somewhat less secure environment given the more modest security regime envisioned by the city for its site than GSA has in mind for the West Campus.
- In the interest of providing some level of increased employment to the surrounding community, might the federal team be willing to make commitments to provide job training and placement for some number of city residents, especially those living east of the river? Can DHS identify the approximate number and type of entry-level jobs that would likely be available?
- As to possible economic spin-off benefits of this project, might DHS also agree to enable and facilitate the provision of information to employees about local stores and other resources that will be available when the 2013 move-in date for the Coast Guard arrives? Might DHS limit the amount of food and other retail services on site and encourage utilization of neighborhood retail options? Might the shuttle bus that will carry workers to and from the Metro stop during the rush hours have an altered mid-day route taking workers seeking lunch and other shopping options off-campus to key points along MLK and Alabama Avenues? If some of the DHS parking ends up on the East Campus, might the comings and goings from that parking space be leveraged by siting appropriate commercial activity nearby? Might DHS encourage its contractors to lo-

cate nearby (as the Navy has done in conjunction with its move to the Navy Yard) and then work with the District to get ground floor retail in whatever new buildings are built to accommodate the new demand for office space?

- Would it be possible for the federal team to work with District officials to plan for some employer sponsored housing in the proximity of the West Campus targeted to DHS workers? Perhaps the city's plans for the development of the East Campus could include such an option.
- Might it be feasible for the understandably security conscious GSA/DHS team to find a way to restore public access to the incomparable view points along the western-most bluff of the site? Since the federal planners seem to acknowledge the importance of keeping the vistas open to those who will work in offices on the site, would it not be possible to also find an acceptable regime that would permit the public, perhaps only in pedestrian mode, to also partake of the view? The Point is sufficiently set away from existing and planned buildings so that it would seem feasible to make this small concession without raising significant security concerns.
- Might the federal team work with local historic preservation groups to arrange for periodic tours of the grounds of the West Campus and the older buildings of significance? Tour participants could be screened just as any visitor to the complex would be. It is important that the national government share with the public the fruits of the billions of dollars to be spent on the restoration of the various facilities so key to the functioning of the original St. Elizabeths Hospital.

These are but some of the possible ways in which such a major federal establishment might reach out to help improve the lives of DC residents, nearby neighborhoods, and the city as a whole, and still accomplish its core mission. Such steps are the minimum the community should expect in return for having a high security facility dropped into its midst with all of the attendant issues a high value target portends. Beyond that, the federal government is duty bound to find ways for this facility to be a net plus to the city in return for the city's support for federal use of the St. Elizabeths West Campus, albeit at a lesser scale than now proposed.

Endnotes

¹David F. Garrison is deputy director of the Greater Washington Research Program at the Brookings Institution.

References and Resources

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For more information:

David F. Garrison
Senior Fellow and Deputy Director
Brookings Greater Washington Research
202-797-6289
dgarrison@brookings.edu

For general information:

202-797-6139
www.brookings.edu/metro



THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

1775 Massachusetts Avenue, NW • Washington, DC 20036-2103

Tel: 202-797-6000 • Fax: 202-797-6004

www.brookings.edu



CENTER ON URBAN AND METROPOLITAN POLICY

BROOKINGS GREATER WASHINGTON RESEARCH PROGRAM

Phone: (202) 797-6139 • Fax: (202) 797-2963

Website: www.brookings.edu/washington