

Friday, March 6, 2009 page 31

WASHINGTON  
**BUSINESS JOURNAL**

Letter to the Editor

## Department of Homeland Security plan flawed

Editor:

The article about St. Elizabeths Hospital in your spring 2009 OnSite magazine omitted vital aspects of the technological alternative to the Department of Homeland Security plan. This omission reflects much of the current debate, in which powerful national strategic considerations are being astonishingly obscured by issues like historic preservation and local economic interests.

N.J. Slabbert has pointed out in The Washington Post that the proposed new DHS compound “would pose an unnecessary security risk to DHS and is questionable financially, environmentally and logistically.” Slabbert urges instead a fiber-optic-connected dispersal of DHS around the capital region in offices located near where staff already live — as I’ve urged for years.

This virtual consolidation idea has been supported on national security grounds by Adm. William A. Owens, former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Homeland Security Today has editorialized that a dispersed, yet connected, DHS worker population, as an alternative to a single massive headquarters, “would keep DHS robust and functioning in the event of a disaster or attack.”

Support for the present DHS plan flows from two flawed sources.

The first of which is a government tradition that favors enormous, centralized structures; physically and organizationally. This tradition doesn’t fit into an age of transportation overloaded to the point of dysfunction, energy waste and pollution, and increased vulnerability to domestic terrorism and natural disaster. Advances in computer and communication technologies make “19th century” concentrations of human bodies obsolete. Mark Addleson, a George Mason University professor, says it’s wrongheaded to co-locate 31 organizations when you need to improve security. Forced centralization is unlikely to solve the organizational-culture problems that have prevented security agencies from collaborating better. DHS leaders must instead manage smarter and share information better. Shoehorning agencies into a single vast building will just perpetuate the same mistakes while making it even harder (and very costly!) to fix later.

The second flawed source is the desperation of local politicians who clutch at the idea that this plan will provide economic manna for the District. Not only is there credible scholarly challenge to this notion because of, inter alia, the scale and necessary insularity of the new compound, but it ignores greater economic realities. Ward 8, D.C.’s poorest ward, won’t be revitalized until it’s made part of a creative regional economic development plan. A virtual consolidation strategy for DHS provides a platform for this.

Then there’s the cost of this mind-numbingly expensive compound. A dispersal plan would cost so much less that it would free a huge sum to be set aside to help D.C. create an economic plan that really works.

And, if the security and financial factors weren't enough, creating yet another commuter-dominated, road-congesting monster in D.C. would boost the region's carbon footprint by an amount that should have any environmentally rational government cringing. Here are a few numbers, from documentable sources, illustrating the annual advantages of virtual consolidation strategy over physical consolidation: Manhours saved with shorter commutes: 6 million. Gallons of gasoline saved: 2.6 million. Tons of carbon dioxide not spewed into the air: 21,000.

Finally, smart growth requires balancing jobs and housing in mixed-use pedestrian and bicycle-friendly land plans. Jurisdictions seeking one of the DHS distributed offices should have such mechanisms in place to mitigate the law of unintended consequences. Done properly, this strategy will also solve the affordable housing problem.

— Jay John Hellman, president, The Hellman Company, inc., D.C.

All contents of this site © American City Business Journals Inc. All rights reserved.

Notes by Jay Hellman (post publication)

*Only three important sentences were omitted by the editor:*

in Para. 2: Slabbert has compellingly expounded the strategic and economic rationale for this conclusion in lucid articles in **Homeland Security Today**, **The Harvard International Review** and **Urban Land** [scroll to third paragraph for links to publications on web page: [http://www.virtualadjacency.com/?page\\_id=2](http://www.virtualadjacency.com/?page_id=2) ]

in Para. 3: Aris Melissaratos, former Secretary of Maryland's Department of Business and Economic Development and now senior advisor on technology enterprise to the president of Johns Hopkins University, has called the concept of consolidating the already dispersed DHS population electronically, instead of physically concentrating them in a mega-HQ, "a great idea" for both the Capital region and DHS.

In last Para.: A prerequisite to achieving this is Vision Planning -- thinking big and thinking long.

\*\* NB: The environmental and traffic numbers included relate only to DHS employees. The true public costs are MUCH greater because the congestion impact DHS will cause will affect 10 times as many vehicles! I also have not included [property damage and bodily injury](#) and death due to auto accidents. [please see this excellent report by AAA ]

<http://www.aaanewsroom.net/Assets/Files/20083591910.CrashesVsCongestionFullReport2.28.08.pdf>