

The Takeover of St. Elizabeths

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Last month the General Services Administration (GSA) announced a plan to locate 4.5 million square feet of office space for the Department of Homeland Security employees on the beautiful and historic campus of St. Elizabeths in Southeast [Metro, March 11]. Along with the offices, the GSA plan calls for 7,000 parking spaces.

The St. Elizabeths campus -- which includes a Civil War cemetery where 300 Union and Confederate soldiers, black and white, lie side by side, and the Point, a spectacular overlook with views of the Mall -- is a National Historic Landmark. This means that, like the Capitol, the White House and the Washington Monument, St. Elizabeths belongs not just to the government or to the city but to the nation. If the campus is converted for use by Homeland Security, however, it will be closed to the public and surrounded by a 20-foot-wide security perimeter.

St. Elizabeths was established in 1855 as the Government Hospital for the Insane. The belief then was that its bucolic setting would provide a curative environment. The Center Building, the first to be constructed, was designed by Thomas Ustick Walter, an architect of the Capitol, and it remains a regal presence commanding the crest of the hill east of the Anacostia. In the first decade of the 20th century, Georgian Revival buildings designed by the Boston firm of Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge, architects of the Stanford University campus, were added.

Until the movement toward deinstitutionalization in the 1970s emptied most of its beds, St. Elizabeths was in the forefront of mental health therapy. Regrettably, 30 years of neglect and deterioration prevent today's visitors from fully appreciating St. Elizabeths' history.

We welcome appropriate redevelopment of this historical site that would be reasonable in scale and compatible in design with the character of the buildings at St. Elizabeths now. Any alteration to the campus's green space, however, should fall within the scope of the McMillan Plan for parks in Washington, and regular public access should be guaranteed, especially to the Point and the Civil War cemetery. Further, any redevelopment should benefit the neighborhood.

The GSA plan to use the site for Homeland Security offices fails on all these counts. New buildings -- some possibly 10 stories high -- would be placed shoulder-to-shoulder with old ones. Green space would disappear. The high-security enclave would shut in its employees and shut out Southeast residents.

In another blow to Southeast, the D.C. Department of Transportation expects that many of the 14,000 Homeland Security employees who would be traveling to and from St. Elizabeths would be routed through nearby residential areas to minimize the traffic increase on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

The GSA should abandon this ill-conceived plan. At minimum, it should identify another federal agency for location at the St. Elizabeths campus, one that could connect with the neighborhood and that would preserve this stunning historical site of national significance for all Americans.

-- Sally Berk -- Rebecca Miller

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