

Fordham Urban Law Journal

Volume 32 | Number 4

Article 3

2005

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Recommended Citation

Patricia E. Gallagher, *SECURING AMERICA'S CAPITAL*, 32 Fordham Urb. L.J. 747 (2005).

Available at: <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/ulj/vol32/iss4/3>

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SECURING AMERICA'S CAPITAL

By Patricia E. Gallagher *

INTRODUCTION

Faced with the challenge of nearly constant threat alerts and reactive solutions in the form of concrete barriers and cordoned-off streets, federal planners in Washington, D.C. are pioneering the field of security design. The nation's capital seems an appropriate location for this work given its status as home to national and international leaders, nearly 400,000 federal workers, twenty million annual visitors, treasured architectural icons, and irreplaceable artifacts of American history.¹ Federal agencies are desperate to prevent the catastrophic damage that may potentially be inflicted by a vehicle attack and are taking preemptive action by installing barriers that they can quickly obtain and install. While these measures sometimes fulfill immediate demands for protection, they mar the city's design, obstruct access to public space, and heighten the atmosphere of terror.

The National Capital Planning Commission ("NCPC" or "the Commission"), the federal planning agency for the nation's capital, stepped forward in March 2001 to formally address the blight of security clutter. NCPC formed an Interagency Security Task Force comprised of federal and local government representatives to develop recommendations for managing security needs.² A few months after beginning this work, the devastating attacks of September 11, 2001 ("September 11" or "9/11") occurred, adding new urgency to NCPC's task. Just one month after 9/11,

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1. NAT'L CAPITAL PLANNING COMM'N, COMPREHENSIVE PLAN FOR THE NATIONAL CAPITAL: FEDERAL ELEMENTS 5 (2004).

2. See Spencer S. Hsu, *Task Force Proposed on Capital Security; Officials Respond to Street Closings*, THE WASH. POST, Sept. 17, 2004, at B01.

the Commission released its report, *Designing for Security in the Nation's Capital*.³ This document set the stage for a more comprehensive urban design plan prepared by the Commission, a plan that many in the security arena have considered groundbreaking.

One year later, in October 2002, the Commission released its *National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan*, which received two major national planning awards.⁴ It is one of the first plans to provide guidance on integrating perimeter security into landscapes and streetscapes.

I. SECURITY RESPONSES PRIOR TO 9/11

While the events of 9/11 prompted a surge in the use of temporary security measures throughout the nation's capital, this development actually emerged several years earlier, following the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. At that time, the Secret Service closed Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House to vehicular traffic and installed guardhouses, delta barriers, concrete planters, and other temporary devices. Closing the Avenue provided a safe and convenient pedestrian zone, but it deprived thirteen bus lines and up to 30,000 vehicles daily of a major east-west traffic artery.⁵ The closure detracted from the appearance of the White House grounds and destroyed the symbolism of placing the President's home on an open street with a direct connection to the U.S. Capitol.

In 1998, the National Park Service, in response to both national and international terrorist threats, installed temporary security measures at the base of the Washington Monument.⁶ These measures included a double row of concrete jersey barriers placed in a ring around the monument plaza, and an interim security structure attached to the east face of the monument.⁷ The barriers were installed as a vehicular barrier system while the interim security structure was installed as a place to screen visitors

3. NCPC, DESIGNING FOR SECURITY IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL (Oct. 2001) [hereinafter DESIGNING FOR SECURITY].

4. NCPC, NAT'L CAPITAL URBAN DESIGN AND SECURITY PLAN (Oct. 2002, Nov. 2004 Addendum) [hereinafter NAT'L CAPITAL]. The plan won two national awards, the American Planning Association's 2005 Current Topic Award for Safe Growth and the American Planning Association's 2002 Federal Division Award for Outstanding Federal Planning Project. See Press Release Nat'l Capital Planning Comm'n, NCPC Plans Win Nat'l Awards (Mar. 22, 2005), available at http://www.ncpc.gov/publications_press/Press_Releases/2004/pr122204.html; Press Release Nat'l Capital Planning Comm'n, Commission's Security and Design Plan Receives Top National Award (Apr. 4, 2003), available at http://ncpc.gov/publications_press/Press_Releases/2003/pr040403.html.

5. See DESIGNING FOR SECURITY, *supra* note 3, at 17.

6. *Id.* at 15.

7. *Id.*

ascending the monument. These additions to the otherwise elegant monument obstructed important vistas and hindered pedestrian circulation.

Pennsylvania Avenue and the Washington Monument represent two of the most significant examples of poor security design prior to 9/11, but they were not alone. Temporary perimeter security had been installed at several facilities in the nation's capital, including the Office of Personnel Management and the Holocaust Memorial Museum.⁸

II. COMPREHENSIVE URBAN DESIGN AND SECURITY PLANNING

The use of ad-hoc security burgeoned after 9/11, bringing even greater relevance to NCPC's security design work. In developing the *National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan*, NCPC collaborated with more than seventy-five departments and organizations representing federal and local government, civic and business groups, the professional design community, and the public.⁹ NCPC presented its design work to dozens of audiences in Washington and around the country and carefully considered public comments in preparing the final document.

The *National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan* addresses security features designed for threats posed by bomb-laden vehicles—not threats posed by pedestrian-borne bombs, letter bombs, or chemical or biological weapons. Using a variety of solutions, the plan shows how to integrate building perimeter security into the environment.¹⁰ When security plans are well-conceived and properly executed, the plan suggests, they can create safe and aesthetically pleasing public spaces that preserve Washington's historic urban design.¹¹

The plan is based on a framework that highlights important precincts, streets, and memorials within Washington's monumental core. The plan addresses the open public spaces of the National Mall, the national monuments and memorials, Pennsylvania Avenue at the White House, the public sidewalks and building yards of several of the city's prominent federal precincts, and downtown Washington.¹² The plan does not

8. NCPC, Office of Personnel Mgmt. Case (1999) (staff report file # 5982). On October 7, 1999 and December 2, 1999, NCPC reviewed plans for a security barrier system at the Office of Personnel Management that would replace unsightly barriers and provide more comprehensive protection. *Id.* On February 3, 2000, NCPC reviewed plans for security bollards at the Holocaust Memorial Museum that would replace jersey barriers and bollards with impact-resistant and visually compatible bollards. *See* NCPC, Holocaust Memorial Museum Case (2000) (staff report file # 2016).

9. *See* NAT'L CAPITAL, *supra* note 4, at iv, 89.

10. *See generally* NAT'L CAPITAL, *supra* note 4.

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.*

advocate installing security measures in every situation, nor does it recommend a one-size-fits-all approach. NCPC urges federal agencies to conduct reasonable assessments of their facilities to determine whether or not security enhancements are necessary.¹³ The agency's function, number of employees and visitors, and building design are some of the factors that affect a facility's threat level. An agency may naturally tend to elevate its threat level and, consequently, end up with a facility that is over-designed for security.

For facilities that *do* require some level of security, the *National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan* proposes solutions that are tailored to particular precincts and ones that will enhance the pedestrian environment.¹⁴ The plan illustrates streetscape design solutions for four street types based on roadway widths, sidewalks, and building setbacks.¹⁵ The street types include monumental avenues, diagonal avenues, special streets, and grid streets.¹⁶ The design for monumental avenues, which connect and define the most important areas of the city, should reflect formality and emphasize the streetscape as a whole.¹⁷ Diagonal avenues, which are typically wide and have significant landscaping, should highlight landscape features.¹⁸ Because special streets form important connections or are part of special planning areas, they should be handled in a way that reinforces their individual conditions and character.¹⁹ Designs for grid streets—the consistent north-south and east-west streets—should be specific to each area, providing continuity with previous design efforts.²⁰

NCPC's plan proposes a family of streetscape elements, including street furniture, landscaped planting walls, security bollards embedded within rows of hedges, and sidewalk planters.²¹ By using elements that pedestrians would expect to find along a sidewalk, designers can create secured streetscapes that are far less intrusive and far more hospitable and attractive.

Since the plan was adopted, federal agencies that previously took an uncoordinated and incremental approach to installing perimeter security are now coordinating their security projects. So far, the plan has been used to

13. *Id.*

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.* at 7.

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.*

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.*

21. *Id.* at 6.

guide more than sixty security submissions by various federal agencies. One of the most prominent projects undertaken as a result of the plan is the redesign of Pennsylvania Avenue in the front of the White House.²² This symbolically significant destination is now a dignified civic space featuring new pedestrian-friendly amenities and site furnishings. Twin-headed streetlights, originally designed for Washington by Henry Bacon in 1923, now line the precinct.²³ Rustic pavement helps to unify the White House grounds with Lafayette Park, and large granite pavers reinforce the avenue's connection to the city's urban fabric. In place of bulky planter pots, specially designed bollards ensure a visually open setting and allow for authorized vehicular access.²⁴ New guard booths complement the classical architecture found along the avenue, and eighty-eight new Princeton American elm trees will provide a welcoming canopy for pedestrians.²⁵

The loss of vehicular traffic through the avenue cannot be fully compensated, but NCPC ensured that the new design for Pennsylvania Avenue would accommodate the Circulator, a hop-on, hop-off shuttle service that will provide riders with a convenient way to visit the city's major attractions, including the White House.²⁶ The redesigned avenue officially opened to pedestrians on November 9, 2004 in a ceremony with First Lady Laura Bush and the federal and local partners who collaborated on the effort.²⁷

Several other security projects have been initiated since adoption of the *National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan*. The iconic Washington Monument, as previously described, served as a great example of poor security design and had become an eyesore along the most prominent walkway in the nation's capital. An initial proposal for a permanent solution called for a circle of 370 bollards, installed 185 feet from the monument's base.²⁸ The Commission rejected this concept, citing the incongruity of placing steel bollards in the gently rolling topography of the

22. NCPC, Federal Highway Admin. Case (2003) (staff file #6132). This project was submitted by the Federal Highway Administration, and the NCPC approved final site and building plans on September 4, 2003. *See id.*

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.*

25. *Id.*

26. *Id.*

27. *See First Lady Welcomes Pedestrians to Pennsylvania Avenue*, NCPC QUARTERLY, Oct.-Dec. 2004, at 1.

28. NCPC, National Park Serv. Case (2001) (staff file #1303/6152). The National Park Service submitted this project, and the NCPC disapproved the proposed concept plan on July 3, 2001. *See id.*

greensward.²⁹ Instead, NCPC approved an appropriate landscape design that complements the Mall setting.³⁰ The new scheme, now under construction, consists of a protective retaining wall, new pedestrian pathways, upgraded lighting, and hundreds of new trees.³¹ Once improvements are completed, the public will once again enjoy unobstructed and attractive views of the world-famous obelisk.

Security plans for the Lincoln Memorial also demonstrate the continuing challenge of finding the right balance between appropriate security measures and site-sensitive design. Preliminary plans for the memorial feature a low wall to enclose the circular lawn on which the Lincoln Memorial sits.³² Other changes include traffic and pedestrian improvements, new street lights, and new concession buildings.³³ One element of the proposal that the Commission did not endorse depicted a long line of bollards above the stairs to the Reflecting Pool.³⁴ NCPC requested a revision to this element after concluding that the proposed concept would form an intrusive barrier between the Memorial and the Reflecting Pool. A more thoughtfully designed scheme should be seamless, offering protection without hindering physical, symbolic, and historic connections.

Improvements to security and design at memorials and monuments are not the only projects underway. Guided by the *National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan*, the world-renowned Smithsonian Institution designed a new perimeter security solution for several of its buildings on the National Mall.³⁵ Custom-designed elements that correspond to differences in architecture, streetscape elements, and roadway conditions will replace temporary components, such as chain-link fencing and ungainly planters, which detract from the appearance and prestige of the National Mall.³⁶ Tree panels, hardened benches, light poles, and retaining walls are a sampling of the elements that will be used in the redesign of the

29. *Id.*

30. *See id.* The National Park Service submitted this project, and the NCPC approved final site development plans on June 5, 2003. *Id.*

31. *Id.*

32. NCPC, National Park Serv. Case (2005) (staff file #6265). The National Park Service submitted various aspects of this proposal for NCPC's review on July 11, 2002, December 4, 2003, February 5, 2004, January 6, 2005, and April 7, 2005. *See id.*

33. *Id.*

34. *Id.* The National Park Service submitted this project, and NCPC approved plans on February 4, 2004. *Id.*

35. NCPC, Smithsonian Inst. Case (2004) (staff file #6423). The Smithsonian Institution submitted this project, and NCPC approved preliminary plans on October 7, 2004. *See id.*

36. *Id.*

Smithsonian.³⁷ The National Museum of the American Indian, a new Smithsonian building on the Mall, prepared its own security scheme to reflect elements of the new structure's design.³⁸ Boulders, planter walls, and granite and bronze bollards comprise the security palette for this project.³⁹

NCPC urges all federal agencies to refer to the *National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan* in designing their projects and works closely with agencies that face heightened risks.⁴⁰ The Federal Reserve, the central bank of the United States, tailored a perimeter security plan to meet its special needs, which include twenty-four hour surveillance.⁴¹ The proposal incorporates kiosks to house security guards and consists of landscape features, including plinth walls and planters, bollards, and a fence wall.⁴²

Constructing and installing permanent security barriers may take considerable time. As federal agencies pursue well-designed solutions, NCPC urges minimal use of ad-hoc measures and directs federal agencies to submit plans for any security projects that will be installed for more than sixty days.⁴³ "Temporary" security barriers have a way of becoming long-term solutions, as observed in the case of the Washington Monument and Pennsylvania Avenue at the White House. To prevent these types of future occurrences, NCPC ruled that no temporary security project should be in place for more than two years.⁴⁴

III. APPLYING NCPC'S SECURITY PLAN OUTSIDE THE NATION'S CAPITAL

While heightened alert levels in the United States may be felt particularly in Washington, D.C. and New York, other cities across the country have installed security barriers around their public facilities, symbolic monuments, and popular tourist attractions.⁴⁵ Although NCPC's

37. *Id.*

38. NCPC, Smithsonian Inst. Case (2003) (staff file #5087). The Smithsonian Institution submitted this project, and NCPC approved final site development plans on August 7, 2003. *See id.*

39. *Id.*

40. NCPC, Policy on Design and Review of Physical Perimeter Security Improvements (2003) (staff file #6318) [hereinafter Policy on Design].

41. NCPC, Fed. Reserve Case (2003) (staff file #6401). The Board of Governors for the Federal Reserve submitted this project, and NCPC approved preliminary site development plans on December 4, 2003. *See id.*

42. *Id.*

43. *See* Policy on Design, *supra* note 40.

44. *See id.*

45. After 9/11, ad-hoc security barriers were installed at several prominent locations

National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan focuses on federal facilities in the nation's capital, its principles and concepts can be applied well beyond Washington, D.C. When perimeter security is deemed necessary, NCPC encourages planners in other cities to consider using security elements proposed in the *National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan*.⁴⁶ Design concepts developed for Washington's downtown are particularly relevant to typical urban areas that consist of blocks with a mix of old and new and a variation of styles, scales, and materials. For standard grid streets, the plan recommends the use of hardened streetscape components that are common to any city block, including streetlights, benches, trash cans, and newspaper vending machines.⁴⁷

Since the plan was adopted, NCPC has been asked to give presentations in cities across the country and around the world. Planners from Ottawa, Canada and Canberra, Australia have turned to the plan as they begin the process of developing their own security solutions.

IV. KEEPING UP WITH EVOLVING SECURITY NEEDS

The Commission has noted the evolution of federal security requirements since the *National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan's* release. The plan provided solutions for protecting against the threat of bomb-laden vehicles, but federal agencies are now seeking protection against additional threats, including chemical and suicide attacks. To defend against such threats, agency security managers are considering an expanded array of security measures not envisioned in the urban design and security plan. The Commission contemplates how these escalating threat assessments and potentially extreme security responses may undermine its objectives for a vibrant capital city that showcases democratic ideals of openness and accessibility. In addition, the cost of ever more sophisticated security measures against an expanding array of threats could overwhelm individual agency budgets.

To address these shifts, the Commission reconvened its Interagency Security Task Force to better understand the evolving threat environment, manage the risk assessment process, and develop reasonable, cost-effective security responses.⁴⁸ As the Commission advances its security design

throughout the country, including Chicago's Sears Tower and Federal Plaza, Seattle's Space Needle, and San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge.

46. See NAT'L CAPITAL, *supra* note 4.

47. See *id.* at 7.

48. See Hsu, *supra* note 2. The task force is comprised of several members and representatives of the National Capital Planning Commission as well as representatives from the Department of Homeland Security. See *id.*

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work, it will continue to work with its partners and stakeholders to find an acceptable balance between meeting legitimate security needs and creating lively, welcoming, and economically vibrant communities.

CONCLUSION

The concrete barriers, sewer pipes, and chain-link fencing that prompted the National Capital Planning Commission's security efforts inconvenienced city residents, workers, and visitors and degraded the appearance of one of the most carefully designed and naturally beautiful cities in the world. And yet, what made these barriers intolerable was their underlying message—that the nation's capital would allow terrorists to limit the American hallmark of open access. The National Capital Planning Commission does not ask federal agencies to ignore the threat reality, but it does ask that agencies cease to install monuments of fear and retrenchment. As the capital's watchful steward, the Commission is committed to preserving urban design ideals and cultivating Washington's two-hundred-year-old planning tradition.