



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on May 28, 2014

\$4.5 Billion Homeland Security Headquarters May Never Be Built

Plans to build a massive new headquarters for the Department of Homeland Security have run up against fiscal reality. Construction is more than \$1.5 billion over budget and 11 years behind schedule, and the project may never be completed, the *Washington Post* reported, based on budget documents and interviews with former and current federal officials. Plans include the renovation of more than 50 historic structures and the building of new ones on the west campus of a 336-acre site owned by St. Elizabeths Hospital, a psychiatric facility run by the District of Columbia Department of Mental Health. The district continues to treat patients at the hospital's East Campus.



Originally pegged at a cost of less than \$3 billion, the new headquarters were to be ready for occupation in 2015. The latest estimate is for the headquarters to open in 2026 at a cost of \$4.5 billion. To reach that goal, Congress would have to appropriate an average \$280 million a year, considerably more than the \$190 million the project received this year.

“GSA and DHS haven’t received the appropriations that this project needs to keep it on its original schedule,” Mafara Hobson, a spokeswoman for the General Services Administration told the *Post*. “Construction is a commodity market, and costs increase with delays.”

So far only a Coast Guard building stands on the otherwise undeveloped federally owned land that is the former West Campus of the hospital. Planned as Washington’s biggest construction project since the completion of the Pentagon in 1943, the new DHS home was to be an economic development effort as well, one that would “provide a tremendous economic boost to the Anacostia and Congress Heights neighborhoods,” Bill Guerin, head of GSA’s Recovery Act Program Management Office told Congress in 2009. But with Congress facing budget deficits in the hundreds of billions each year, along with rising costs in military and entitlement programs and an ongoing crisis at the Veterans Administration, there is now open doubt over whether the project will ever be completed. Former DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff, who once called a consolidated headquarters for the department essential to its mission, now concedes it may lose in the competition of spending priorities.

“I suspect there is no constituency for building a new headquarters complex right now,” Chertoff told the *Post*. Rep. Jeff Duncan (R-S.C.) who chairs the Homeland Security Subcommittee on Oversight and Management Efficiency, used a football analogy to suggest it’s fourth down and too long to go for the headquarters plan.

“Sometimes you just have to drop back and punt,” said Duncan, whose subcommittee has criticized the management of the project. “At what point in time does the government just cut its losses and look for a



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better way of doing things?”

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush announced the creation of the Office of Homeland Security, with a mission to “develop and coordinate the implementation of a comprehensive national strategy to secure the United States from terrorist threats or attacks.” A year later Congress created the Cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security, while expanding the mission to include coordinating responses to both natural and man-made disasters, as well as efforts to find and sever connections between drug traffickers and terrorists. The new law created the largest government reorganization since the creation of the Defense Department in 1947. The 22 agencies merged under the DHS umbrella included the Coast Guard, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Customs and Border Protection, Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the Secret Service. The FBI and the CIA were not included. A new Transportation Security Agency was also created and put under DHS to conduct screenings at airports. With various agencies scattered throughout Washington and northern Virginia, the department began making plans in 2006 for a new headquarters to consolidate functions and save millions spent on leased office space and transportation costs.

In its first few years, the department was widely ridiculed for its frequent color-coded assessments of the likelihood of terrorist attacks and its call for citizens to protect themselves with duct tape and plastic to seal windows in case of a chemical or biological attack. More recently it has been criticized for its grants to cities and towns for the purchase of military-style weapons and armored vehicles for local police. DHS also established regional “fusion centers” around the country to coordinate federal, state, and local law-enforcement efforts to detect and thwart terrorism. Most Americans were unaware of them until one, the Missouri Information Analysis Center, made headlines in 2009 by issuing a report warning of potential dangers from pro-life activists, third-party voters, and Ron Paul supporters. In 2012, an investigative committee of the U.S. Senate published the results of a two-year long investigation of the DHS fusion centers and concluded:

Despite reviewing 13 months’ worth of reporting originating from fusion centers from April 1, 2009 to April 30, 2010, the Subcommittee investigation could identify no reporting which uncovered a terrorist threat, nor could it identify a contribution such fusion center reporting made to disrupt an active terrorist plot.

Last month the *Albuquerque Journal* in New Mexico noted how deeply the DHS has immersed itself in local law enforcement and community life. “Today, in addition to protecting America’s borders and airports, the department is interrogating people suspected of pirating movies at Ohio theaters, seizing counterfeit NBA merchandise in San Antonio and working pickpocket cases alongside police in Albuquerque,” the *Journal* reported. “Homeland Security agents are visiting elementary schools and senior centers to warn of dangers lurking on the Internet.” The department’s expanded mission mirrors its sprawling presence across and beyond the nation’s capital. Though DHS has been in business for more than a decade, “The U.S. government does not have a single definition for ‘homeland security,’ according to a report issued last year by the Congressional Research Service, warning that “potentially, funding is driving priorities rather than priorities driving the funding.”

The funding appears to be driving the priorities rather generously. The department has grown from a \$29 billion a year agency employing 180,000 people in 2003 to a \$61 billion-a-year enterprise in the current fiscal year. In a modest concession to fiscal reality, the budget request for next year is for \$1 billion less, which may result in some reduction of DHS activity. Local police may have to pursue



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pickpockets and visit schools and senior centers on their own.



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