

## Redeveloping the St. Elizabeths Hospital Campus: Opportunity and Complexity on a Hill

by David F. Garrison<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*Washington, D.C. should soon be able to redevelop the St. Elizabeths Hospital complex, a sprawling, historically significant and strategically placed 356-acre site overlooking the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers in the city's southeast quadrant. However, success will require a comprehensive planning approach with wide-scale citizen involvement, cooperation from the federal establishment, and a sense of urgency on the part of city leaders to get it done. Washington needs a concerted and sustained effort by all involved to create this new neighborhood on a hill.*

A new neighborhood could soon grace the District of Columbia. It would command a breathtaking view of much of the city as well as a large swath of Northern Virginia. It would stand high atop a bluff overlooking the confluence of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers. It would lie minutes away from an on-ramp to Interstate 295 and a short drive from Capitol Hill and downtown Washington. A Metro stop would be found a short walk away. Some of the buildings in this neighborhood would likely be newly constructed; others would be renovated historic structures. All would be in an urban setting with considerable open space interspersed.

Where is this marvelous spot? It is the 356-acre St. Elizabeths Hospital complex. Now largely vacated, it lies between the Historic Anacostia and Congress Heights neighborhoods in Southeast Washington.

Think of what it would mean if this large section of southeast Washington was turned into a thriving, mixed income, mixed residential, commercial, and office environment. The benefits would flow not only to the struggling neighborhoods that surround it but to the city and the region as a whole.

While it is hard to overstate the site's potential, given its scale and location, the obstacles to realizing this vision are daunting.

Multiple ownership fragments the site. Control is shared by the federal and District governments, and by several agencies within each. What is more, the entire 356-acre parcel has been designated as a national historic landmark, making redevelopment options much more complicated and expensive. Add in that the most historic of the buildings on the property are in the worst condition, and it becomes clear the cost of redeveloping the site will be high. It will take real skill for the District to sort

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out all of the interested parties, deal with the many barriers, and realize the great potential this site presents.

An enormous opportunity for the city could slip away if the federal government fails to cooperate and the District's Mayor and City Council do not act decisively and with real vision. Now is the time for both federal and District leaders to make sure that the redevelopment of the St. Elizabeths property really happens.

### **A Bit of History**

In order to fully understand both the magnitude of the opportunity this site presents and the complexity of the redevelopment challenge it poses, consider first the extraordinary history of this unique parcel.

Founded in 1855 as the Government Hospital for the Insane, the facility first came to prominence during the Civil War, when it housed injured soldiers from both the Union and Confederate armies. Some of these soldiers were former African-American slaves fighting for the Union. A cemetery lies on the grounds and includes the graves of soldiers white and black, Union and Confederate from the 1864-1866 period. This may be the first public cemetery in this country that buried people without regard to race.

The Civil War soldiers recovering from their wounds at the hospital referred to where they were staying in letters to family as St. Elizabeths so they would not have to say they were in a hospital for the insane. The name referred to the hospital's location within an old royal land grant called St. Elizabeths. In 1916, Congress officially changed the name of the hospital, by then a sprawling complex of interrelated buildings, to St. Elizabeths (retaining the unusual plural spelling). In addition to the many architecturally significant brick buildings, the open space and land use plan produced beautiful landscaped grounds and a remarkable brick wall encompassing much of the site west of Martin Luther King Avenue.

Founded by Dorothea Dix, a leader in working with the mentally ill, St. Elizabeths Hospital became the nation's premier public health hospital helping patients with mental illnesses. By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were 7,000 in-patients and 4,000 employees operating out of over 100 buildings spread out across the east and west portions of the property. A number of famous personages spent time at the hospital. Most famous perhaps was the poet, Ezra Pound, an American citizen who moved to Italy and by the World War II became a vocal critic of America, espousing fascist views. He was captured by the US army in 1943, indicted for treason, found mentally incompetent to stand trial, and sent to St. Elizabeths where he stayed for 13 years. More recently, John Hinckley, who shot President Reagan, continues on as a patient in the secured portion of the main psychiatric hospital building.

In 1987, the federal government transferred the mental health facility to the District of Columbia along with the 174-acre east campus—and so began the increasingly complex nature of the site's ownership and management, which remains a tricky obstacle to redevelopment. The west campus remained federal property under the auspices of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The District was given permission by HHS to utilize all of the buildings on the west campus in return for being responsible for protection and maintenance of the entire site and grounds. The DC Department of Mental Health took charge of managing all activities on the site.

The transfer of these mental health service functions to the District was not without controversy. The District government felt that many of the buildings on the east campus were in substandard condition when they were handed over and federal funds provided at the time of the transfer to renovate these buildings were insufficient. The District sued the federal government to recover additional funds needed to bring the buildings up to code, a case that has still not been decided.

When Congress approved the transfer of the east campus property to the District in 1987, it required the city to develop a plan for the entire 356-acre site for submission to Congress. The terms of this Congressional mandate included giving the District the right of first refusal for properties on the west campus while the District's plan was being developed and reviewed by Congress. The District sent its plan to the Hill several years later, proposing continued institutional use for the entire site. Because bringing the buildings up to modern-day standards would be so costly, the District informed Congress that it did not want to take ownership of the west campus unless sufficient federal funds were provided along with the transfer. No Congressional hearings were ever held on the plan nor was any other action taken. Meanwhile, the District continued to occupy the west campus and to use a number of the buildings.

In 1991, the U.S. Department of the Interior responded to a petition by local preservationists and designated the St. Elizabeths Hospital as a national historic landmark, the highest historic status available under federal law—status equivalent to that given to the U.S. Capitol building and grounds. Not only are the majority of the historic buildings protected by this designation but so are the grounds and the civil war cemetery, raising the bar considerably as to future reuse plans. (A site plan of St. Elizabeths in its current configuration appears as an appendix to this paper.)

### **The Present Predicament**

Steeped in history and occupying a huge, unique track of land, St. Elizabeths clearly presents the District with a special redevelopment opportunity. Moreover, the pieces are now falling into place that will give the city the chance to decide the property's future.

In 2001, HHS notified the General Services Administration (GSA) that the Department no longer needed any of the 233 acres and 61 buildings on the west campus, formally triggering the federal excess property disposition process. GSA is managing the process and working closely with the District's Office of Planning as the disposition steps unfold. For its part, the Office of Planning has launched a community planning discussion about the future options for the whole property.

The Office of Planning and GSA enlisted the help of a panel of experts provided by the Urban Land Institute (ULI) to provide redevelopment strategy ideas for the property. The ULI panel conducted its study in May 2002 and delivered its recommendations soon thereafter<sup>2</sup>. The panel urged that the entire 356 acres be consolidated into a single entity under the control of the District and a master plan be developed for the entire site, possibly dividing the site into four planning sub areas. The panel also urged that there be close integration of the plans with the needs of the surrounding community in order to reduce the site's isolation from its surroundings.

The District has made a few decisions regarding use of about 60 acres on the east campus. A new Unified Communications Center for the city is now under construction on 10 acres along MLK Avenue near the northern border of the property. Next to the Communications Center, the Metropolitan Police Department is in line to utilize the historic barn and stables for their horses. Further, all existing mental health activities will be consolidated into a new St. Elizabeths Hospital facility, along with three existing buildings, all located at the eastern edge of the site just north of the Congress Heights Metro stop. Once these new facilities are built and all mental health activities are moved to the new hospital complex, the District government says it will have no other need for space, ultimately making available for other use over 100 acres and 40 buildings on the east campus.

## **A Major Redevelopment Opportunity East of the River**

Developing a new residential neighborhood (with associated retail services) on the St. Elizabeths site is a major opportunity to increase the District's population and enhance its tax base, without displacing any existing residents. It is also an opportunity to create new jobs for D.C. residents and reduce blight and poverty in surrounding areas.

Creating new neighborhoods with significant numbers of new residential options should be an important part of the Mayor's overall strategy of increasing the city's population by a net of 100,000 people in ten years. Unique among major American cities, the District's fiscal health largely depends upon the taxes paid by people who live within the city. Since most of the city is long since built out and occupied, structuring policies designed to increase the number of city residents without displacing lower income people must be done with care. Thus, a major component of a successful approach to building a larger residential cadre in the city is identifying areas where new living opportunities can be created where today there are none. The St. Elizabeths parcel presents just such an opportunity.

At the same time that the District works to increase its population dramatically, it also needs to take aggressive steps to reduce the number of District residents who are poor. Unlike most other major US cities, the District's concentration of poverty increased between 1990 and 2000. The District's Ward 7 and 8 neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River have the largest concentration of poor people in the city. The timeline for reviving these neighborhoods is no doubt an extended and expensive one. Fortunately, the Mayor has directed a number of major investments into these neighborhoods and has selected five areas east of the river for inclusion in his targeted neighborhood revitalization effort (<http://www.planning.dc.gov>). The redevelopment of the St. Elizabeths property could provide a significant boost to the prospects of expanding the number of city residents east of the river and to knitting this portion of the city closer to the rest of the District.

With careful thought, the redevelopment of the campus could also breathe important new life into the surrounding residential streets and commercial strips of the struggling Congress Heights area. Happily, the presence of a Metro stop and close proximity of Interstate 295 opens up all sorts of options. Finding ways to direct the redevelopment of the St. Elizabeths property so it helps lift up surrounding neighborhoods is an opportunity not to be wasted, especially for a section of the city largely ignored until recent years.

St. Elizabeths lofty prominence on the bluff above the confluence of the two rivers also makes it a jewel to be fixed in the crown of the Anacostia Waterfront Initiative now in the design phase under the guidance of the District's Office of Planning. That initiative covers a vast sweep of the city's waterfront on both sides of the Anacostia starting from the National Arboretum and coming all the way down and around to a point just short of the 14<sup>th</sup> Street bridge.

## **Coordinating the Complexity**

A creative, farsighted redevelopment program at St. Elizabeths could produce a very special complex of residential, institutional, public and private uses. In undertaking such a complicated project, it is important that a coordinated overall plan be developed for the entire, 356-acre footprint as called for by the ULI panel, and that the plan be integrated with the assets and needs of the surrounding neighborhood, overall East-of-the-river investments, and the other plans for the Anacostia waterfront. Plenty of community input

must be sought, not only with the surrounding neighborhoods but with all interested District residents. This comprehensive plan needs to be completed before any segments of the plan are spun off for early implementation. Fortunately, the District's Office of Planning is taking just such a holistic, comprehensive and consultative approach.

### **The Preservation Challenge**

Juxtaposed against the alluring promise of the site are many challenges, not least the imperative that the historic character of the site be preserved in appropriate ways and the spectacular views of the city and river be protected. Indeed, the property's rich, even unique history raises expectations about how the buildings and grounds should now be used. Yet, sadly, it may turn out to be prohibitively expensive to preserve more than a few of the key historic buildings without huge public subsidies, a decidedly unlikely prospect in today's fiscally stressed federal and District budget worlds.

Many of the buildings on the West Campus (the federal holding) are in serious disrepair, some to the point of beginning to fall down (sagging roofs, collapsed floors, and the like). This is particularly the case with the massive Center Building, much of which was built 150 years ago. Renovation of some buildings may not be possible within reasonable per square foot cost limits. On the West campus, many structures would need extensive rehabilitation inside and out. For some like the Center Building, this would mean a near total gutting, not a small matter given the presence of 16-inch thick, load-bearing, interior masonry walls throughout. Those who seek to have all the main buildings on this landmark site preserved will no doubt come into significant conflict with the cold, hard development cost realities of the day. It seems inevitable that a number of the most decayed buildings will have to be razed, national historic landmark status notwithstanding.

### **Leveraging Investment for the Greater Good**

A site this large and complex offers a number of opportunities. In the formulation of a site plan, the role for market rate residential and/or commercial development should be considered. The market rate for such a special place as this could be quite high. As a result, these structures could throw off significant subsidy streams that would be useful in underwriting the costs of other development elsewhere on the property, including for badly needed affordable housing. This leveraging technique was used most recently to great effect by the Oyster School project in Northwest Washington. Indeed, leveraging may be the key to enabling the overall plan for St. Elizabeths to have a mix of uses and incomes.

### **What Happens Now?**

The General Services Administration is moving the West Campus through the required process for disposing of excess federal property. HHS, as the current owner of the West campus property, has paid for assessments of the environmental hazards on the site and is in the process of contracting to have the buildings stabilized and mothballed. Throughout, GSA has kept in close consultation with the District's Office of Planning since the property was declared excess

Meanwhile, the District has begun a public planning process for the site, announced with fanfare by the Mayor in early 2003. Since then, the Office of Planning has held a series of Saturday morning meetings with community representatives and other interested parties. That Office also has organized a citizen

steering committee to help oversee the planning process. On a bright Saturday in March, the District held an open house at St. Elizabeths and invited the public to tour the area, learn about existing plans for the site and the potential for its overall redevelopment.

It seems likely that the development of the area will require special legislation approved by Congress, both to provide some funds to underwrite key aspects of the project (half the property is, after all, still federal) and possibly to create a development authority to oversee the entire process. It would be this special authority that would oversee the process and guide the movement of the land from the federal government to its ultimate reuse.

### **Grabbing the Brass Ring**

It is not often that a city as densely settled as is Washington, D.C. has the opportunity to determine the redevelopment fate of a parcel as large and strategically placed as St. Elizabeths. This is an undertaking that requires a comprehensive planning approach with wide scale citizen involvement and a sense of urgency on the part of city leaders. What we need is a concerted and sustained effort by all involved with a focus, intensity and sense of urgency sufficient to get the job done in years rather than decades. As was the case with the redevelopment of Pennsylvania Avenue, this project requires a large vision, a dedicated development authority, and a gifted project leader. And because of its location in a neighborhood, it will require an open, consultative discussion with the community.

There are many obstacles and lots of inertia, all of which could lead to nothing happening at all. That would be a shame because the possible gains for the city are considerable. In the end, all residents of the District, regardless of where they live, have a stake in the future of the St. Elizabeths Hospital property.

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### **Endnotes**

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

<sup>2</sup>See Urban Land Institute, "Saint Elizabeths planning process, Washington, DC: A Redevelopment Strategy", An Advisory Services Panel Report for the District of Columbia and the US General Services Administration, May 5-10, 2002.

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### **References and Resources**

Urban Land Institute. 2002. "Saint Elizabeths Campus, Washington, D.C.: A Redevelopment Strategy." An Advisory Services Panel Report, May 5-10.

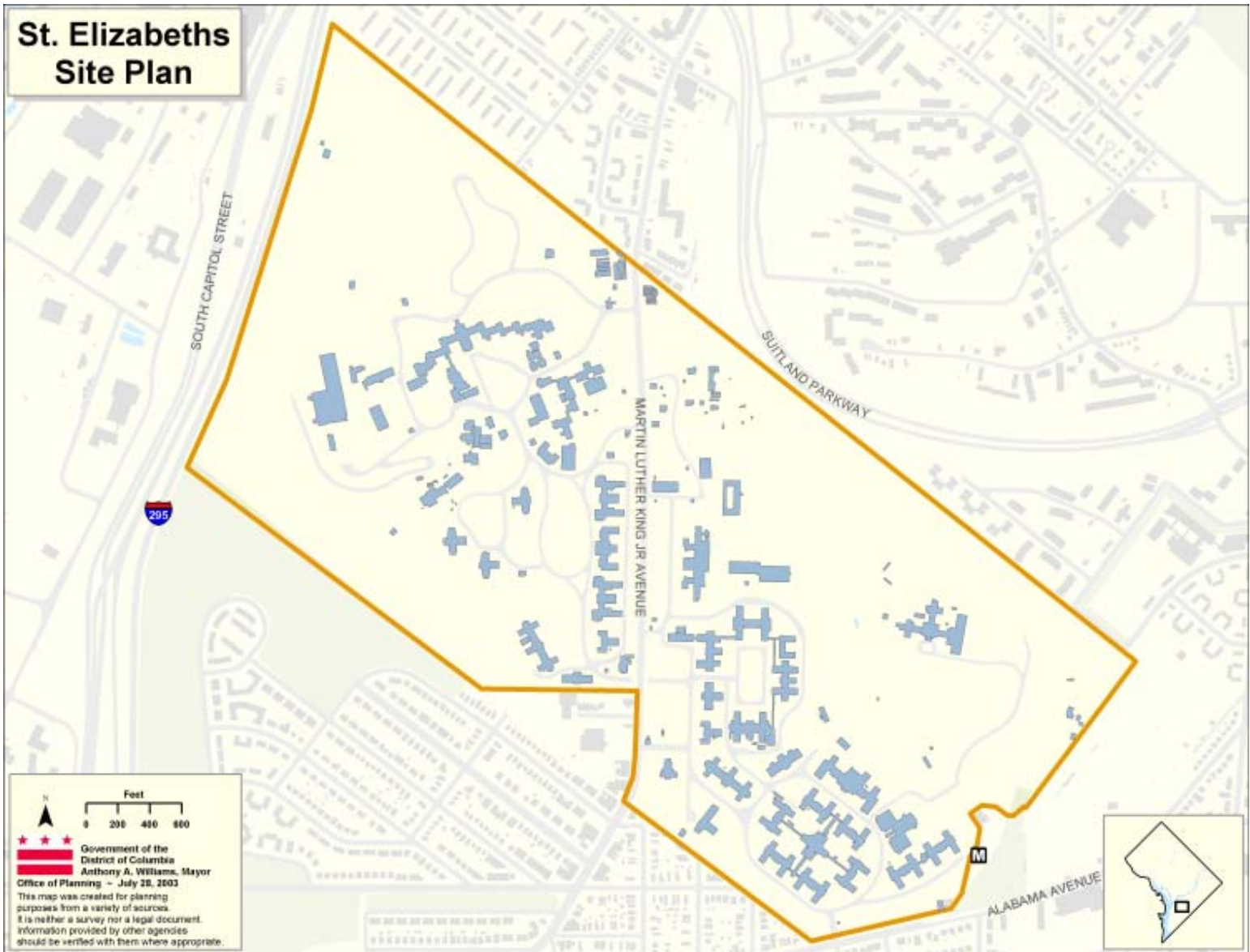
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D.C. Office of Planning: [www.planning.dc.gov](http://www.planning.dc.gov)

Anacostia Waterfront Initiative: <http://planning.dc.gov/project/waterfront/index.shtm>

## Appendix



The St. Elizabeths Hospital site covers 356 acres and includes over 100 buildings. The property is located just across the Anacostia River in Washington’s Southeast quadrant and is divided roughly in half from north to south by Martin Luther King Avenue. The west campus was built first, starting in 1855, and is surrounded on three sides by a high brick wall. The east and west campuses are connected by a tunnel under MLK Avenue. In addition to being adjacent to a Metro stop, St. Elizabeths is within easy reach of Interstate 295, the Suitland Parkway, the Capitol and downtown Washington.

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