

MEDIA RELEASE



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NCPC Hosts Nine Capital Cities at International Policy Forum in Washington

*Securing capital cities against terrorist threats, shaping the national identity,
and tackling controversial commemoration projects dominate the talks*

Washington, DC – The National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) is finding that the most controversial issues debated here in the nation’s capital are the same issues challenging their counterparts in capital cities around the world.

How to best secure a capital city against terrorist threats, and the decision of when and where to establish a memorial on nationally treasured public space is as contentious an issue in other foreign capitals as it is here in Washington, D.C. That is just one of the clear commonalities emerging this week as NCPC commissioners and planning officials host a weeklong policy forum for senior officials from capital cities around the globe.

Representatives from nine international capitals, including Baku, Berlin, Brasilia, Canberra, Moscow, Nicosia, Ottawa, Seoul, and Tokyo are in Washington attending the second annual Capitals Alliance conference. The forum provides senior policy and planning officials an opportunity to discuss issues that are unique to capital cities so they can benefit from each other’s experiences. Delegates are quickly learning that many of the most divisive issues they face at home also prove to be the most difficult for their international colleagues.

“We have much to share with our colleagues from around the world,” said NCPC Chairman John V. Cogbill, III. “As capital city planners we all have special obligations to respect our national heritage while ensuring that our cities thrive as lively centers of economic, social, and cultural life for the people who live and work in them. We clearly have a great deal in common, and there is much we can learn from one another.”

“Capital cities play such a vital role in establishing the national identity,” said Hee-yun Jung, director of the Department of Urban Planning and Design in Seoul. “I find it to be of immense value to trade information on how we deal with issues that clearly affect us on all sides of the globe. Whether it’s transportation, balancing the local and federal interests, or discussing our cultural values, we will all benefit from this exchange.”

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Security and commemoration have proven to be hot topics of conversation among the delegates. Officials from Russia reported that securing their national capital and ensuring the public safety is the number-one issue they are grappling with in Moscow. They are hoping to learn some alternative means to securing public spaces during their visit this week to Washington.

Many of the delegates from the other capitals concurred that securing their own cities against potential terrorist attacks is high on their priority list, and they expressed great interest in the Commission's recent publication, the National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan. The plan proposes solutions such as hardened street furniture, low landscaped walls, and curbside plantings to provide security without marring the beauty and design of the streets and buildings they are meant to protect.

Canberra, Australia's national capital, which is traditionally an open, accessible city, like many other capitals, is now finding itself addressing security concerns for its major public buildings and spaces. Planning officials there say they have been drawing on the work already done by NCPC to integrate building perimeter security with the design of public spaces.

"Implementation of integrated security measures began in Canberra earlier this year following the September 11 attack in New York and the terrorist attack in Bali which claimed the lives of so many Australians," said Graham Scott-Bohanna, managing director of design for the National Capital Authority. "NCPC's urban design and security plan has proven invaluable to us in meeting the heightened needs required for the visit to Canberra this week of President George Bush."

"The talks on security are not only interesting, but they allow for a crucial exchange of information on an issue of grave importance to all capital cities," said Annalie Schoen, with the Senate Department of Urban Development in Berlin. "I find it admirable that we can all have such frank discussions on not only how to plan with security in mind but also to determine how far is too far. The Capitals Alliance is a great way to exchange ideas and learn solutions to challenges and issues that are common to us all."

"The Capitals Alliance discussions touch on a broad range of valuable topics, including the protection and security of national capitals, not just from terrorist attacks but also from natural disasters," said Shinsuke Tanaka, Tokyo's deputy director-general of the National and Regional Planning Bureau, Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport. "We are happy to share our ideas and plans with the other delegations and learn from the experiences of other capitals too."

The issue of where to locate national memorials also proved to be a popular topic of discussion among the delegates who share the challenges of deciding when and where to locate a national memorial on public land. Officials from the National Capital Commission (NCC) in Ottawa concurred that managing a successful commemorations program comes with its own set of unique challenges for capital cities.

“As the organization responsible for land use and design approval for the federal lands in Canada’s Capital Region, we are often tasked with ensuring that nationally significant symbols find the most appropriate home,” said Marcel Beaudry, Chairman of the NCC. “As we are seeing with our international counterparts here, clear guidelines, partnerships and public consultation are all important elements in establishing national memorials.”

Brasilia, Canberra, Ottawa, and Washington, D.C. founded the Capitals Alliance in 2002 to give policymakers a forum during which they can exchange ideas on the unique political and symbolic requirements of national capitals.

Since convening this week’s gathering in Washington on Monday, security and commemoration have dominated the talks, but the delegates have also shared plans and thoughts on balancing the often-conflicting national and local interests of their city, managing national land and historic buildings, and planning the location of embassies and other international organizations.

“I believe Capitals Alliance will help nations understand each other, and thus find common ground,” said Faidon Nicolaou, city engineer of Nicosia, Cyprus. “I look forward to a time when this organization embraces all capital cities of the world.”

The delegates have kept to a busy schedule since arriving in Washington, attending a panel discussion on Capitol Hill on balancing national and local development interests; touring Washington’s monuments and waterfront; attending a reception and lecture with international architect and master planner of the World Trade Center site, Daniel Libeskind; visiting the U.S. Capitol for a tour of the future visitors center and a briefing with the Architect of the Capitol; and going to City Hall to meet with Washington, D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams.

“The District of Columbia is pleased to serve as the host city for members of the Capitals Alliance,” said D.C. Mayor Anthony A. Williams. “As city stewards and planners, we benefit from sharing our responses to common challenges. The District is honored to serve as the backdrop for this year’s collaborative effort.”

Also on the agenda, a scholars roundtable at the National Press Club examining the symbolic, cultural, and political role of capital cities in shaping and expressing national identity; a tour of embassy row; and a visit to some of Washington’s nearby historic towns and communities.

“The shared experiences of our meeting are invaluable to those of us at the National Capital Planning Commission,” said Executive Director Patricia Gallagher. “To be able to exchange ideas and lend guidance to one another on key planning and development issues is of enormous benefit. NCPC is proud to be a founding partner of the Capitals Alliance and we are delighted to be joined this year by five new Alliance members. Clearly we have so much insight to gain from one another, and I look forward to future collaborations with our international colleagues.”

“Capital cities play important political, economic, cultural and symbolic roles for all nations,” said Fikret Pashayev, economic counselor with the Embassy of Azerbaijan, who represented the capital city of Baku. “Bringing together capitals from many nations to discuss important issues is a great idea. Cooperation among capital cities will help us all to better address our common challenges as well as promote peace, security and mutual understanding in today’s globalized world.”

“National capital cities are very special places to live and to find cultural, social and economic resources for a nation,” said Ivelise Longhi, secretary of the Brazilian Department of Housing and Urban Development. “Although members of the Capitals Alliance have many differences, we share optimism for the 21st century capital city. We look forward to hosting the 2004 meeting of the Capitals Alliance in Brasilia next fall so that we may continue this valuable exchange of dialogue with our sister cities.”

The National Capital Planning Commission is the federal government’s central planning agency in the District of Columbia and surrounding counties in Maryland and Virginia. The Commission provides overall planning guidance for federal land and buildings in the region. It also reviews the design of federal projects and memorials, oversees long-range planning for future development, and monitors capital investment by federal agencies.

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