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Maryland officials anxious over FBI headquarters back-and-forth



The selected site for a FBI headquarters in Greenbelt, a parking lot next to the Greenbelt Metro Station. (Katharine Wilson/Sun Staff)



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For nearly a decade, there were hopes that a new FBI headquarters would spur a significant expansion in real estate projects and revenue in the Greenbelt area. Now, the location is once again in limbo, launching another round of the waiting game.

“When a commitment is made, that has impacts,” said Greenbelt Mayor Emmett Jordan. “The back-and-forth just creates this uncertainty.”

Federal, state and county officials are pushing for any path forward for the bureau to land in Greenbelt after the Trump administration changed course.

A parcel of land, 50 feet from the Greenbelt Metro Station, was announced as the new site for the FBI headquarters in November 2023 after years of studies and competition from other regional bidders. Being next to the Beltway, a MARC train and a Washington, D.C., metro stop made the location accessible for commuters and federal workers who live in Prince George’s County.



As a result, Greenbelt and other neighboring jurisdictions prepared for a massive influx of federal workers expected to work, shop and possibly move to the area.

But on July 1, the General Services Administration announced that the FBI, currently housed in the aging J. Edgar Hoover Building in downtown Washington, D.C., would instead be moved blocks away to the existing Ronald Reagan Building. The building currently houses other federal agencies and event spaces.



The Trump administration said this was an effort to save taxpayer money, as the Greenbelt campus was expected to cost the government billions.

‘Wasted time, wasted resources’

Greenbelt city budgets that date back to at least fiscal year 2017 highlighted efforts to attract the FBI headquarters and how it could “transform” the area. Budgets also mentioned the possibility of mixed-use developments adjacent to the eventual bureau, allowing employees to live and shop nearby.

One development plan approved by the county's planning board, Jordan said, would have built a mixed-use development with a hotel and retail spaces next to the possible headquarters, but approval lapsed during the lengthy process nearly a decade ago.

Other nearby improvement proposals were put on hold to meet the needs of the would-be FBI location, Jordan said. This included a redesign of the Beltway Plaza Mall and another corporate plaza renovation. A plan to make a bike path connecting one Greenbelt neighborhood to the metro would also change should the bureau come to the once-promised area.

"Projects have been on hold, on again, off again," Jordan said. "It's just wasted time, wasted resources."

The back-and-forth also impacted other neighboring cities, like Berwyn Heights and northern College Park, whose mayors say could benefit from federal workers shopping or living in the community.

Berwyn Heights recently commissioned an economic study from the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission to help understand how the small town can develop, especially along Greenbelt Road.

Berwyn Heights Mayor Tiffany Papanikolas said this and the town's ongoing move of their police station to this major road was done to prepare for the FBI Headquarters.

When the FBI headquarters was awarded to Greenbelt, Papanikolas saw the county and other local jurisdictions begin to plan new developments and some retail spaces start long-planned renovations.



Tiffany Papanikolas, the mayor of Berwyn Heights, at a Dunkin' on Greenbelt Road, an area the town is hoping to develop to capitalize on the thousands of FBI employees that would shop and possibly move to the area if the headquarters moves to Greenbelt. (Katharine Wilson/Sun Staff)

“There have been a lot of ideas, but not a lot has been done,” Papanikolas said. “When a town or region stagnates, it’s just as bad as going backwards.”

Bordering the Greenbelt metro station is a suburban area of College Park, which Mayor Fazlul Kabir said could see a real estate boom if the FBI plan comes to fruition.

For a city budget that relies on real estate taxes, this could help the city improve its services, he said.

The influx of FBI employees year-round could also help College Park businesses that face revenue drops during summer and winter breaks at The University of Maryland. Kabir also sees an opening for the FBI to collaborate with the university’s research facilities.

There is a growing sense of frustration among officials that the recent switch has undermined the work done to secure the 2023 approval. This includes a perception that the federal government has historically not placed major federal facilities in Prince George's County, particularly when compared to those in Virginia.

The area has also been hit by cuts to the federal workforce.

Maryland politicians use leverage

Sen. Chris Van Hollen, a Maryland Democrat, added a provision to an appropriations bill that would reserve \$1.4 billion for a new FBI headquarters in Greenbelt. But it stalled the appropriations bill from moving out of the full committee when all Republicans flipped their vote against the bill, upset at the inclusion of the provision.

Van Hollen argued that using funds intended for the Greenbelt location to support the newly announced Ronald Reagan Building location sets a precedent of presidential overreach.

Republicans on the committee, including Alabama Sen. Katie Britt, argued that this is not unusual and has happened to other federal projects.

Prince George's County Executive Aisha Braveboy, a Democrat, said the county can "wait out" the president and that the county is also considering legal options to keep the Greenbelt plan.

After the Obama administration initiated the process to build a new FBI headquarters, the first Trump administration canceled the effort in 2017, before the Biden administration restarted the site search.

“His tenure will end, but the FBI and the opportunities will still be there,” Braveboy told The Sun. “It was a fair process and one that resulted, obviously, in the Greenbelt coming out the victor. So we’re going to always fight what’s fair.”

The Greenbelt campus was set to start construction in 2029 after Trump’s current term ends.

The possible cancelation of the Greenbelt headquarters comes two months after announcements that the county would lose the Washington Commanders and a Six Flags location.

Maryland budgeted \$200 million for the Greenbelt FBI headquarters from the fiscal years 2024 and 2025 budgets, and it has seven years to disburse the money for this project. Funds would return to the state if the Board of Public Works votes to cancel.

Democratic members of the Maryland congressional delegation have promised to fight changes to the FBI headquarters plans.

“We’ll fight this just like we did last time,” said Rep. Glenn Ivey, who represents the district.

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