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The Washington Post

washingtonpost.com

The Washington Post

July 17, 2002 Wednesday
Final Edition

Homeland Security Cost Weighed; Officials Wonder How Nation Can Pay for President's Strategy

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SECTION: A SECTION; Pg. A08

LENGTH: 916 words

The biggest gap in President Bush's homeland security strategy is a lack of specifics on the cost of protecting the nation from terrorist strikes or who will pay the enormous tab, according to lawmakers, analysts and state and local officials who took their first look at the proposal yesterday.

Many credited Bush and Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge with crafting the first comprehensive plan to identify the country's most serious vulnerabilities, but raised questions about how the nation can shore up security at a time when the federal government faces a sizable budget deficit and many cities and states are strapped for cash.

The 88-page White House plan calls for new technology to identify nuclear, chemical and biological weapons; beefed-up security at the nation's ports, power plants and other potential targets; an overhaul of computer systems so that dozens of federal agencies can be linked with one another; and developing vaccines against bioterror attacks, among its many provisions.

The strategy's cornerstone is the creation of a Department of Homeland Security, comprised of all or part of 22 federal agencies, that is being debated in Congress.

"There is a lot here that strikes me as really sensible and laid out well," said Stephen E. Flynn, a retired Coast Guard commander who is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. "It does a very good job of candidly laying out the state of vulnerabilities. But will there be resources available? That's the real question."

"It's fine as a blueprint," agreed Ashton B. Carter, a professor at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government who has studied homeland security matters. "But it's a far cry from a specific investment plan. That we still await and need. None of this will come to pass unless the investments are made."

Meeting with congressional leaders at the White House yesterday, Bush said the strategy, the result of nine months of

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planning, "lays out clear lines of authority and clear responsibilities . . . for federal employees and for governors and mayors and community and business leaders and the American citizens." But he acknowledged that "there are a lot of tough decisions that will be made" in the months to come.

According to the White House, the public and private sectors are spending \$ 100 billion a year on homeland security. The administration is seeking \$ 38 billion for homeland security in the next fiscal year, much of which would be channeled to state and local governments.

The strategy does not project how long that level of spending would continue, or whether it must be increased to achieve the strategy's objectives of preventing attacks, reducing the nation's vulnerabilities and minimizing the damage if a terrorist strike occurs.

Karen Anderson, president of the National League of Cities and mayor of Minnetonka, Minn., said that many local anti-terror efforts could "come to a screeching halt very soon" because communities are running out of money.

"Cities are doing everything they can, but we need some relief for training, buying equipment, help with overtime," said Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino, president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

In an interview yesterday, Ridge said the strategy, which Bush formally released yesterday, was meant to be a "road map" that included goals and budget priorities but no exact figures. He said the costs at this point remain unknown.

Ridge said that some of the biggest unknowns are the costs of strengthening cyber-security, guarding food and water supplies and protecting other underpinnings of the nation's infrastructure. Because the private sector controls as much as 90 percent of such assets, he said, it will be called upon to foot much of the bill.

"This is the beginning strategy, not the end," Ridge said.

The proposed Homeland Security Department, with roughly 170,000 employees, would oversee border and transportation security, emergency preparedness and defenses against weapons of mass destruction. The administration had been criticized for proposing such a department before it had developed a homeland security strategy.

A few details of the plan quickly came under attack. The American Civil Liberties Union objected to a proposal to create minimum uniform standards for driver's licenses, saying the move appeared to be a step toward a national identification card. Ridge said yesterday that was not the case, maintaining that the government wants to crack down on fraudulent documents.

Sen. Jon S. Corzine (D-N.J.) criticized a proposal to put new limits on the Freedom of Information Act to prevent release of information about the terror risks faced by various industries. Corzine said the proposal interferes with the public's right to know about hazards at chemical plants and other facilities in their communities.

For the most part, however, lawmakers praised Bush's plan but emphasized that it did not represent a dramatic development in the country's war against terrorism.

"There's not a lot new here, but it's a very valuable statement," said Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman (D-Conn.), who chairs the Governmental Affairs Committee, which will write a Senate version of the Homeland Security Department next week.

Lieberman and Sen. Fred D. Thompson (Tenn.), his Republican counterpart on the committee, said that the strategy does not fully address weaknesses in the ways that intelligence is analyzed and shared.

Staff writer Juliet Eilperin contributed to this report.

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LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

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