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AN OFFICE OF FOREIGN MISSIONS NEWSLETTER

consultations

To assist and inform the diplomatic community

Groundbreaking at the International Chancery Center

Cranes extending against the skyline signal a boom in new construction at the International Chancery Center between Connecticut Avenue and Reno Road in upper northwest Washington, DC. In March of this year, Office of Foreign Missions Deputy Assistant Secretary Theodore E. Strickler participated in the groundbreaking ceremony at the site of the future Slovak chancery. In the same vicinity, the chanceries of Malaysia, Nigeria, and the United Arab Emirates are in various construction phases. Three other new chanceries opened their doors this year – Bangladesh, Brunei, and Ethiopia, and Pakistan plans to build a new chancery in the coming months.

Photo courtesy of Embassy of Slovak Republic

Deputy Assistant Secretary Theodore Strickler (left) lends support as Ambassador Martin Butora breaks ground for the new Slovak chancery.

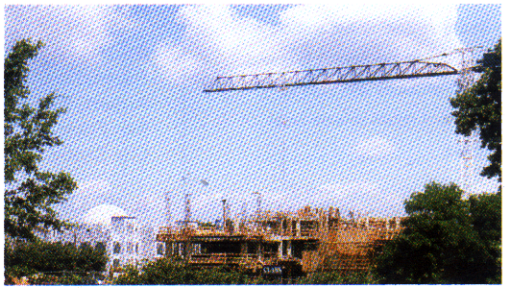

Photo courtesy of Robert E. Denny

The International Chancery Center is experiencing a resurgence of construction activity.

Located on 47 acres of federal land, the Center was conceived as a secure and tranquil community designed to ensure a comfortable and convenient working environment for diplomatic missions. The facility is nearly at capacity with 11 buildings completed, 4 under construction, and a number of sites leased out or on hold.

The Office of Real Property, Bureau of Administration, in the U.S. Department of State, has the responsibility for assignment, renovation, and construction in the Center. Donna Mavritte is the Center's coordinator. Embassies locating their chanceries at the Center are encouraged to present an architectural style that includes design elements reflective of their country, to preserve the international flavor of the Center. Examples of this can be seen in the arabesque style that adorns the chancery of the United Arab Emirates and in the Brunei chancery's replication of houses built on stilts over water.

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A Perennial Showcase: The Gardens of the International Chancery Center

By Jane C. Loeffler, Ph.D.
contributing author

It is easy to take gardens for granted, but the gardens at the International Chancery Center are too extraordinary to pass unnoticed. In a bold decision in 1985, the State Department hired Wolfgang Oehme and James van Sweden, two landscape architects best known for using perennials,

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Photo courtesy of James van Sweden

The perennial gardens of the International Chancery Center may be the largest planned perennial garden in the world.

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OFM
OFFICE OF FOREIGN MISSIONS
US DEPARTMENT OF STATE

OFM Procedure

Real Property Acquisition and Property Tax Exemption

At last you have finally found a place to locate your mission's chancery or identified a suitable place to live. Vaguely, you recall there are some procedures that need to be followed but don't know where to start. Read on – here is what you need to do. In accordance with the Foreign Missions Act, foreign missions in the United States and its territories must notify OFM prior to any purchase, lease, sale, renovation, or changes in use of real property. Such transactions are subject to approval by the Department of State.

Procedure

The review process is initiated by the delivery of a diplomatic note to OFM's Property Section. The note should include the following:

1. Property address, including apartment or suite number.
2. Proposed use of property (i.e., chancery, chancery annex, consulate, residence).
3. Method of acquisition (i.e., purchase, lease, alteration, expansion).

The note, as well as any correspondence referencing real property, should be sent to:

Department of State
Office of Foreign Missions/Property Section
Room 2238
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20520
(202) 647-4554
(202) 647-1919 (fax)

While OFM has up to sixty days to review the request, in most cases the Property Section is able to provide a response to routine requests in three weeks. A mission may not conclude a contract or lease agreement prior to obtaining OFM's authorization. A contract or lease contingent upon the Department's approval is acceptable.

Chancery Use

Current policy dictates that all missions must locate their chanceries and chancery annexes in the District of Columbia.

Alternative sites currently are being explored for future chancery locations as property costs increase and availability declines. A diplomatic note (number 00-175) was recently sent to Chiefs of Mission to solicit their views on locating offices outside the District of Columbia.

Prior to occupying new chancery office space, missions are normally required to obtain an occupancy permit from the Government of the District of Columbia. Depending on the location of the property, a public hearing before the Foreign Mission Board of Zoning Adjustment may be necessary before the permit is issued. In such cases, missions will need to consult OFM and retain private legal representation.

OFM has regional offices in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles to assist consulates in complying with the laws and regulations of the jurisdiction in which the consulate is located. Consular posts have the option of providing the required written notification directly to the appropriate regional office rather than through their embassy in Washington.

Residential Use Authorization

Prior authorization is also required before a mission buys, leases, or sells residences for staff members. However, individual mission members who lease or buy residences in their own name need not seek prior authorization.

Renovations & Alterations

Expansions/alterations to existing diplomatic properties (office and residential) are subject to the rules for original properties, and missions must receive authorization from OFM prior to any construction. In addition, missions are required to obtain all appropriate building permits for the project and comply with local building codes and regulations. Based on reciprocity, exemption from permit fees may be possible.

Q&A Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What is INSPASS?

A: The INS Passenger Accelerated Service System (INSPASS) is an automated system at airports that can significantly reduce immigration inspection processing time for authorized travelers. Arriving at a port-of-entry, the traveler proceeds to an INSPASS inspection queue. There, the person inserts a card into a machine at an INSPASS kiosk, similar to an automated bank teller machine, and is directed to follow screen prompts. Processing times of 11 to 20 seconds are typical.

Q. Where is INSPASS operational?

A: INSPASS is now operating at a number of airports including Dulles International Airport, Los Angeles International Airport, Miami International Airport, Newark International Airport, John F. Kennedy International Airport, San Francisco International Airport, Vancouver International Airport, Toronto City Centre Airport, and Detroit Metro Airport.

Q. Who is eligible to use INSPASS?

A: Diplomats, representatives of international organizations, or airline crews from Visa Waiver Pilot Program nations may voluntarily enroll in the INSPASS program if they travel to the United States three or more times a year.

More information on INSPASS is available at www.ins.usdoj.gov/graphics/howdoi/inspass.htm

Property Tax Exemption

After receiving authorization to purchase a property, foreign missions may be entitled to exemptions from real estate taxes.

The procedures for obtaining exemption in the Washington Metropolitan Area are as follows:

Recordation and Transfer Taxes: A mission must send a written request to OFM well in advance for exemption with information about the purchase including the proposed property settlement date. If the property is entitled to exemption, OFM will prepare a letter addressed to the proper taxing authority for the mission to submit at settlement.

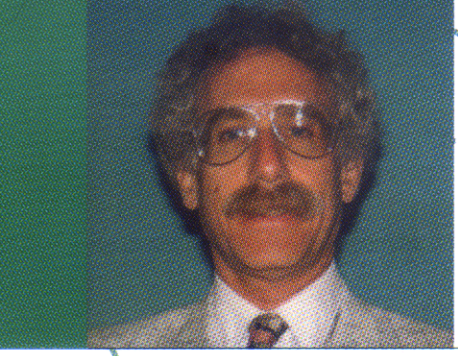
Property Tax: A mission must send a written request to OFM for exemption. The information provided should include the address of the property, the date of OFM's authorization of the purchase, and the date the deed was recorded. OFM will submit a request for property tax exemption directly to the appropriate taxing authority.

Even if a mission is granted property tax exemption, bills from some taxing jurisdictions may include charges or fees for services to the property which must be paid. Property tax bills in Montgomery County, Maryland, for example, include garbage and sewerage charges, which will be listed on the tax bill and be sent to the foreign mission property owner.

Procedure for Missions Outside Washington, DC

The procedure for obtaining exemption for consular properties varies by jurisdiction. OFM and its regional offices are prepared to assist missions and their consulates whenever necessary.

The staff of OFM's Property Section is available to assist foreign missions and answer questions throughout the process. The telephone number of the Property Section is (202) 647-4554.



Faces of OFM

RONALD B. RABENS

Ronald B. Rabens, a career Foreign Service officer, is the new OFM Managing Director for Operations. In this role, he will oversee OFM operations (Diplomatic Motor Vehicles, Tax, Customs, Property and Travel) and OFM's five regional offices. Mr. Rabens joined the Foreign Service in 1971 and served in Belgium, Côte d'Ivoire, France, and Switzerland, and in a variety of senior positions in Washington, DC. His most recent assignment was as Staff Director of the Board of Examiners in the U.S. Department of State Office of Recruitment, Examination and Employment. Mr. Rabens' top priority is to continue to provide great customer service and be responsive to the diplomatic and consular community's concerns as they relate to various OFM programs.

Mr. Rabens succeeds Richard Jaworski, who will serve as Counselor for Administrative Affairs in Warsaw, Poland.

A PERENNIAL SHOWCASE: THE GARDENS OF THE INTERNATIONAL CHANCERY CENTER

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bulbs, and dramatic ornamental grasses to create elegant, low-maintenance landscapes.

Initially, the Department invested in the Center's landscape in order to attract discerning tenants, please neighbors, provide a buffer zone, prevent erosion, and give the whole project a design unity. The designers faced the task of unifying a diverse architectural assemblage and also solving topographical problems associated with the site. They combined retaining walls, terraces, and steps with plants to provide erosion control on steep slopes and promote drainage.

To trap water run-off, for example, they constructed a "sunken garden" that functions like a holding pond. As van Sweden puts it, the garden (behind the Austrian Embassy) can hold 30 feet of water for 45 minutes and then slowly let it run off into the storm sewer system without overloading it. That sort of rain, he says, occurs once in ten years, but without such a system, neighbors would be flooded.

The prize-winning garden also needs less maintenance than a typical garden in which gardeners plant annuals in beds, dig them up after they have bloomed, and replace them with other plants as the seasons change. The ICC garden is already complete, but it does require upkeep, and, to its credit, the Office of Real Property still works with Oehme, who supervises the maintenance, occasionally pulling weeds himself. According to van Sweden, the all-season display requires no dead-heading, no pesticides, and relatively little water or fertilizer. He also says that his own Victorian-style garden fence in Georgetown gave him the inspiration for the steel perimeter fence at the ICC.

Van Sweden further describes his work saying, "I wanted to build—to build and see results, like being a sculptor." He compares what he does to what an artist does in shaping materials into pleasing compositions—using varied textures, materials, shapes, and colors—with the added element of time (gardens grow) and the additional elements of weather and light. "Our job is to provide the framework," he says, "and let the plants express themselves."

The impressive plant list includes forty-two varieties of perennials, ground covers, and grasses and bulbs of all sorts. According to the designers, this may be the largest planned perennial garden in the world—with 275,000 perennials and 250,000 bulbs—more than enough daffodils to dazzle commuters on Reno Road.

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Domestic Servants

By Lawrence P. Dunham
Office of Protocol, U.S. Department of State

Over the years, it has become common for persons assigned to embassies, consulates and international organizations to employ domestic workers to assist in the operation of their households. Although U.S. citizens and permanent resident aliens may hold these positions, the majority of domestic workers are A-3 and G-5 visa holders.

While the U.S. government has for many years permitted foreign government officials and employees to sponsor A-3 and G-5 visa holders and has permitted these workers to accept employment in the U.S., it is important to note that both the employer and the employee assume certain responsibilities in this arrangement.

In order to assist employers and employees to establish a good faith employer-employee, beginning this year, every employer is required to offer a written contract of employment to a domestic worker. The contract should include the following elements:

- A description of the duties to be performed by the domestic worker, as well as information pertaining to the hours to be worked, days off, the wages to be paid and confirmation that transportation to and from the U.S. will be paid by the employer

- It must be in English and, if necessary, in a language which the employee understands

- Both copies must be signed by the employer and the employee

NOTE: A copy of the contract must be submitted when the domestic worker applies for a visa to come to the U.S. and anytime the visa must be renewed or extended. If an A-3 or G-5 visa holder wishes to change employers while in the U.S., a contract must be submitted at the time the visa is annotated to indicate the name of the new employer.

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Vital attractions: A visitor's spectrum

U.S. Department of State Diplomatic Reception Rooms:	527 public tours and 27,900 visitors per year
The White House:	1 million visitors per year
Potomac Mills (area shopping mall):	24.3 million visitors per year

GROUNDBREAKING . . .

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At the highest point of the Center is a federal office building known to many who work there as State Annex 33 (SA-33). This building was conceived as the Town Hall for the Center. The federal building reflects a style reminiscent of late 19th century American architecture and provides office space for federal government organizations including the U.S. Department of State's Office of Foreign Missions, Diplomatic Security and Uniformed Secret Service. At the foot of the hill is the ultramodern INTELSAT headquarters, the only international organization located on the grounds. Between INTELSAT and the federal office building is Central Park, a focal point of the perennial gardens that surround the Center.

An important initiative of the Center is to assist with reciprocity issues overseas. The Department of State has on several occasions linked land at the International Chancery Center with negotiations abroad.

Photo courtesy of Robert E. Denny

The chanceries of the United Arab Emirates and Brunei are two of the recent additions to the Center.

Photo courtesy of Robert E. Denny

Embassies are encouraged to present an architectural style that includes design elements reflective of their country to preserve the flavor of the Center. The facade of the Bangladesh chancery symbolizes the vast delta of the Ganges River, flowing into the Bay of Bengal.

DOMESTIC SERVANTS

(continued from pg 3)

All employers must observe applicable U.S. law governing the employment of domestics including those relating to payment of the prevailing wage, ensuring that workers are treated fairly and equitably and that they are accorded living and working conditions which meet prevailing standards in the United States. Employers also have an obligation to ensure that the passport of the domestic worker always is available to him or her.

It is important that your embassy or international organization register your domestic worker with the Office of Protocol and that Protocol is notified when the domestic leaves your employment. Any time a domestic changes employers he or she must be re-registered with the Office of Protocol. Visas and I-94's must be kept up-to-date. If a domestic worker's I-94 expires, he or she will be required to leave the country (and may be required to return to his or her country of origin) to apply for a new visa. This process may be costly and time consuming.

Domestic workers are reminded that unless they are U.S. citizens or green card holders, they may not work for anyone other than their sponsoring employer. Also, there are prohibitions against persons who undertake domestic employment solely as a means to enter the U.S. without the intention of working. They not only may be guilty of abuse of the visa but also of subverting the intentions of their employer.

Further details are set forth in circular diplomatic notes recently transmitted to all embassies in Washington and missions to the United Nations in New York. Requests for copies of these notes as well as questions about the employment of domestics should be addressed to embassy and mission administrative offices.

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