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Municipal Web sites may help terrorists plot attacks

By S.A. Miller
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Too many details on municipal Web sites can tip off terrorists to security weaknesses and vulnerable targets, a military researcher told a conference of U.S. mayors in the District yesterday.

"The sites tell too much," said Gerald G. Brown, distinguished professor of operations research at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif.

Mr. Brown was a featured speaker yesterday at the Mayors' Technology Summit on "Homeland Security, Safety and Economic Development."

About 60 mayors and city officials from

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across the country attended the symposium, which was sponsored by Temple University's Fox School of Business and Management and the D.C. government.

Before his presentation at Stephen Decatur House, Mr. Brown said municipal leaders must not confuse "sunshine" laws, which require public access to some government data, and the allure of "really cool Web sites."

Many officials rushed to embrace the new Internet culture and hired people to design elaborate Web sites to show off their cities without considering potential consequences, such as aiding enemies in the terror war, he said.

About 95 percent of U.S. towns and cities with more than 10,000 residents have Web sites, said Curt J. Anderson, president of Municipal Web Services, a Birmingham, Mich.-based firm that designs Web sites for local governments.

Mr. Anderson disagreed that such Web sites are leaking sensitive information.

"About three months after 9/11, all our clients had us take off all information about well heads or any type of engineering drawings of buildings," he said. "I don't think there is much of that on the Web any more."

Still, Mr. Brown insisted that seemingly innocuous information, such as budget data, can become fodder for terrorist plots.

"Frequently these sites are used to ask for things: 'We need a firetruck. We need a hazmat crew,' " Mr. Brown said. "If I'm attacking you, that's pretty good information."

With rudimentary technology, terrorists can surf the Web and often find out everything they need to know to plan an attack on American cities, he said.

The conference also delved into topics such as developments in wireless infrastructure, cybersecurity and emergency communication technologies for first-responders.

Peter Verga, principal deputy to the assistant secretary of defense for homeland defense, summed up the problem facing government officials as they prepare for a terrorist attack — the same quandary they also seem to face when posting Web sites.

"It's those things we haven't thought about that we have to worry about," Mr. Verga said in his keynote address to the conference over lunch at the Hamilton Crowne Plaza Hotel.

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