

Police nix meeting near world leaders; Public forum 6 kilometres from Montebello too close for comfort

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Byline: Don Butler, With files from Roger Collier

Police have derailed plans for a public forum on the Security and Prosperity Partnership that was to take place six kilometres from where the leaders of Canada, Mexico and the U.S. will gather next month for a summit.

Several weeks ago, the Council of Canadians put down a \$100 deposit to rent the community centre in Papineauville, not far from the summit site in Montebello, for the public forum.

The forum was scheduled for Aug. 19, the day before Prime Minister Stephen Harper, U.S. President George W. Bush and Mexican President Felipe Calderon are due to start two days of meetings on the security partnership, a controversial initiative aimed at more closely aligning the three countries in a variety of areas.

But Brent Patterson, the council's director of organizing, said a Papineauville official called late Tuesday to say the RCMP, the Surete du Quebec and the U.S. army would not allow the municipality to rent the facility to the council for the planned forum.

Mr. Patterson said Frederic Castonguay, the town's general manager, reported that Guy Cote, of the Quebec police force in Montreal, had told him the council "is an activist organization opposed to the summit and that it would not be wise to have us set up in the community centre."

Mr. Castonguay yesterday confirmed he had been called by Mr. Cote, who told him that the police and U.S. army need the community centre as a base of operations for summit security.

"They didn't want us to rent it to anyone because they need the room there to put equipment and special vehicles," he said, adding the police position was not open to debate.

"There was no choice."

Sgt. Marc Butz, a spokesman for the Surete du Quebec in Montreal, said police reserved the community centre "because it's strategic and it's for the security of everybody."

He denied that police reserved the site to keep activists at bay. "We didn't take the place because it's an activist group. We need it for the operation."

Mr. Patterson reacted angrily to the police move. "It's deplorable that we are being prevented from bringing together a panel of writers, academics and parliamentarians to share their concerns about the Security and Prosperity Partnership with Canadians," he said.

The Council of Canadians, a citizens' organization dedicated to promoting Canadian sovereignty, was formed in 1985 in response to policies initiated by the Brian Mulroney-led government. Members have protested against everything from free trade with the U.S. to the introduction of Bovine Growth Hormone into the Canadian milk supply. Since 2004, the council has concentrated on discouraging economic integration with the U.S.

It views the Papineauville community centre as an ideal location for the public forum because of its size -- it can hold up to 1,000 people -- and proximity to Chateau Montebello, where the leaders will meet Aug. 20-21.

It has already begun lining up speakers for the forum. Along with

council chair Maude Barlow, it had tentative acceptance from University of British Columbia professor Michael Byers and was also approaching parliamentarians. The loss of the centre throws those plans into disarray.

"We will have to scramble a bit and see what options we can figure out," Mr. Patterson said. Moving the forum to Ottawa is the likeliest fall-back position, he added.

So far, police have said little about security arrangements for the partnership summit, which is being held in Canada for the first time.

Last month, a town official in Montebello told Mr. Patterson police were planning to erect a 25-kilometre security perimeter around the town, with checkpoints as far away as Thurso and Hawkesbury. The Montebello official said police were going to turn back any vehicle carrying more than five people. At the time, the RCMP said security planning was still in progress and no decisions had yet been made on its effect on people living and working in the area.

Since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, increased threats have resulted in increased security at meetings between international leaders. A 25-kilometre security perimeter is a reasonable precaution, said Barry Cooper, a political science professor at the University of Calgary.

"The easiest way to ensure safety is distance," he said.

A 6.5-kilometre radius security zone surrounded Kananaskis, Alta., during the G8 Summit held there in 2002. Many other security measures were in place at the summit, including ground forces armed with automatic rifles, an air-defence anti-tank system, a 150-kilometre no-fly zone and a 24-hour patrol of the skies by a fleet of fighter jets. Mr. Cooper says the Montebello summit will have a similar degree of security. "You can be sure it will be pretty strong. I wouldn't advise anyone to try to get through the 25 kilometres."