

WASHINGTON - Take that, New Yorkers.

Karl Rove, dubbed President Bush's "brain," knows it's worth protecting Omaha from terrorist threats.

Bush's chief political adviser had to show up the other day at D.C. Superior Court for possible jury duty. When he did, the Washington Post reported in a breathless gossip column, he bumped into Madeleine Albright.

The newspaper said Rove was overheard telling President Clinton's former secretary of state that " Omaha (which just received a surprising chunk of anti-terror funds) is a target because all the phone lines cross there."

Omaha got a 38 percent boost, to \$8.1 million this year, in federal homeland security money. The spike provoked squawks from New York City tabloids and politicians because the Department of Homeland Security chopped the Big Apple's anti-terror funds by 40 percent.

Is Rove right?

Yes, that could be part of the justification, says Nebraska Lt. Gov. Rick Sheehy.

"Karl thinks Omaha is important for that reason, so we appreciate his support," said Sheehy, the state's homeland security liaison to the federal Department of

Homeland Security.

U.S. Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., said he was glad Rove "leaked" word of Omaha's vast telecommunications network and vital national security role.

"I'm pleased someone finally recognized the infrastructure in Omaha," Terry said.

Homeland Security officials in Washington would not respond to requests for information about why Omaha qualified for money under the Urban Area Security Initiative, a program under which anti-terror grants have been allotted to a number of major U.S. cities.

Among factors besides its telephone network, according to Sheehy, are Omaha's sizable population, an Interstate highway crossroads, numerous railroad lines and the city's proximity to two nuclear power plants.

To draw new businesses, city business leaders and Chamber of Commerce officials have long touted Omaha's telecommunications network as unique for a city of its size.

That network was born when the Strategic Air Command, predecessor to the modern-day Strategic Command, was established at Offutt Air Force Base near Bellevue to oversee the nation's nuclear weapons systems. The former Northwestern Bell Telephone Co. installed high-capacity phone systems for SAC.

Terry said that basically involved "an incredibly large pipe of telecommunications wires."

Over time, private companies found ways to use extra space on those lines and set up a large 800-number telephone system in the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1992, Omaha became one of the first cities to receive a fiber-optic network that enabled telemarketing to take off and made Omaha a key focal point for that industry.

Omaha also was the first city to have complete coverage by an Integrated Services Digital Network, or ISDN, providing digital transmissions of voice, data and signaling, said Kevin Langin, senior marketing director at the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce.

Further, Omaha has access to major north, south, east and west fiber-optic telephone networks. It has two big electronic switching systems stations that greatly expand its ability to handle long-distance calls to and from the city.

Omaha's role as a communications center was underscored on Sept. 11, 2001, after terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. Bush flew from an event in Florida to Offutt, where he monitored the crisis for several hours.

Langin recalled hearing the late ABC-TV news anchor Peter Jennings wondering aloud why Bush would go to Offutt.

"But he was at the best place he could be," Langin said.

Terry noted that StratCom also uses an intranet system for communication within the U.S. Department of Defense, and that relies on Omaha's telecommunications backbone.

After Hurricane Katrina pounded the Gulf Coast, calls to the American Red Cross offering help went through Omaha phone lines, Terry said.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency is interested in building a notification system that could send emergency messages before or after natural disasters to thousands of homes, cell phones or pagers.

Sitel Corp., an Omaha teleservices company, has asked for meetings with FEMA because it "can do that right now," Terry said.

Because of Omaha's vast telephone capacity, Terry asserts that if a disaster struck New York City, Omaha would be able to handle a great many telephone calls spawned by the crisis.

"In national security, our telecommunications infrastructure makes Omaha a pretty important homeland security location," Terry said.

Does he think that such an argument might change the minds of Omaha's critics in New York ?

"Nope," Terry said with a chuckle. "They just want all the money."

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