

# Letters

## Where Scientists Gather

Once again I have returned from a scientific meeting where the facilities were those typical of a large hotel or sports arena. The meeting facilities were either converted ballrooms or designed for athletic events. The blackboards were postage-stamp size; the main meeting rooms were monsters wherein no one in the center, much less the back, of the room could see; there were a great number of parallel sessions; and the audio-visual facilities embraced nothing even as advanced as an overhead projector.

Once again I wondered why we keep doing this to ourselves. Surely there must be a better way of achieving scientific communication. I believe the AAAS, NAS-NRC, and the NSF should join together to sponsor the construction—somewhere near the geographical center of the country—of a scientific center, specifically and architecturally designed for scientific meetings. On some virgin landscape out in Kansas or Missouri, not too far nor yet too near to some jetport, build an *adequate complex designed* for effective verbal and nonverbal communication of scientific information. This center would contain the sort of lecture rooms to be found in a good modern university and an adequate number of large auditoriums of sophisticated design. When an audience becomes too large even for the latter, recourse could be had to closed circuit TV, perhaps in the individual hotel rooms. Also there should be a scientific library, small informal conference rooms, rooms for display of scientific equipment, perhaps NSF and AAAS offices, and on the periphery, adequate, nonluxury hotel space, restaurants, and even nightclub concessions for those light-hearted scientists. . . . And all this designed for reasonable cost and minimum frustration.

There appears to be an adequate number of scientific meetings going on the year around, from the very smallest organizations to the Federation of Biological Societies, to insure an adequate, steady market for the facilities

of such a scientific convention center. And it could be a showplace for the best efforts and information of contemporary science, both humanistic and physical. I realize the difficulties of capitalization involved in these times of retrenchment, but if such a scientific convention center could not be achieved on our own, perhaps Mr. Hilton could be interested in building a "Scientific Hilton."

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## Arrogance over Clean Air

The Greater Boston area has been involved in a series of steps to set and implement air quality standards under the Federal Clean Air Act. Because we feel that these events have raised important questions concerning scientists and public decision-making, we wish to bring them to the attention of the members of the scientific community, many of whom are involved in similar proceedings in other parts of the country under this Act or other environmental legislation (see Abelson's editorial, 20 Mar., p. 1567).

In the fall of 1969, an advisory committee composed mainly of scientists and engineers from universities in this area recommended to the state public health department a tentative set of air quality standards for sulfur oxides and suspended particulates. At a hearing in November which drew an overflow crowd of about 1000 people, a succession of civic groups, representatives from several branches of the medical profession, environment groups, and concerned individuals were almost unanimous in their criticism of the proposed standards as being far too lenient. In general, the citizen groups requested standards which were 25 to 35 percent more stringent for the urban areas and, in addition, requested very much more stringent standards for the outlying regions which already have relatively clean air. The public health department

adopted a version which differed only in minor respects from those so strongly condemned at the hearing. Further public outcries were sufficient to cause the matter to be reopened twice again, although the advisory committee continued to defend its proposals as adequate, while, at the same time, characterizing the opposition as emotional and irresponsible. Eventually, the department somewhat strengthened one of its five numerical standards and then sent them to Washington where they now await approval by HEW pursuant to the Act.

This month the chairman of the advisory committee gave a lecture at Harvard on air pollution at which he was asked why such disregard was shown for the clearly expressed wishes of the public, even though the Clean Air Act explicitly emphasizes the significance of the public hearing. He replied that he did not regard the public as "competent" to testify about the standards since they "didn't understand what the numbers meant." He stated further that the main function of the hearing was to allow the public the chance to say that it wants "pure air" and that the job of translating this wish into numerical standards should be left up to the experts on his committee, who should not consider themselves obliged to heed the public's wishes in such technical matters.

As students of environmental engineering and scientists involved in several national and local environment groups, we vehemently reject this elitist contempt for the public's involvement in such an important question. First, we feel that sufficient information was made available to the public to enable concerned nonspecialists to present intelligent opinions which deserved recognition. Furthermore, we do not regard the issue as purely technical; like most environmental problems, such as nuclear power, the SST, noise pollution, and offshore oil drilling, air pollution involves conflicting social priorities as well as esthetic and economic consideration. Finally, the scientific basis for setting air standards is notoriously inconclusive and incomplete. The public thus must play an important role in determining the extent to which we should require margins of safety as a protection against unforeseen harmful consequences of miscalculations or inadequate information.

As more and more federal and state decisions involve scientific questions, many of our colleagues can expect to