Lobbying Urged for Facilities Fund

Science's "pork barrel" problem—that is, the spate of direct congressional authorizations for university research facilities*—is going to get worse if alternate strategies are not found to finance the overhaul of the nation's research infrastructure. The trouble is, lots more federal money will be needed if erosion of research budgets is to be avoided, and no one expects lots more money to be forthcoming in the foreseeable future.

Such was the downbeat message at a conference of scientists and university administrators from around the country that was held in July at the National Academy of Sciences. The 2-day meeting, on financing academic research facilities, was staged in response to a recommendation by the National Science Board's (NSB) Committee on Excellence in Science and Engineering, which was set up to address the pork barrel situation.

The problem is one of "immense proportions," according to NSB chairman Roland W. Schmitt, who said somewhere between $5 and $20 billion—representing a doubling of the current rate of expenditure—will be needed over the next 20 years. But most federal sources for funding research facilities dried up by the early 1970's, and the federal share of capital expenditures has sunk from 30 percent to 15 percent in the past 20 years.

Various solutions have been proposed, including an independent nonprofit lending corporation primed with government money. But the most likely options, said Lehigh University president Peter Likins, are an expanded system of indirect cost recovery in which more overhead expenses are incorporated into research grants, and the creation of what would be in effect a pool for facilities along the lines laid out in a bill introduced by Representative Don Fuqua (D–Fla.), chairman of the House Committee on Science and Technology.

The Fuqua bill is designed to generate $10 billion for facilities over the next decade through a combination of federal "start-up" funds, a requirement that 10 percent of research and development budgets be allocated to facilities, and a 50 percent requirement for matching funds (*Science*, 5 July, p. 31). Most participants seemed attracted to the scheme, although Fuqua described it more as a "trial balloon" or "umbrella" for consensus-gathering rather than an imminent reality (realism not being strongly apparent in the bill's provision for adding $470 million to the science budget in fiscal year 1987). "We are in for some rough, rough times budget-wise," warned Fuqua.

This being an intractable fact, the participants had a frustrating time of it looking for ways for science to get a bigger piece of a nonexpanding pie.

There was clear sentiment that "bypass" operations in Congress must be stopped, but there was controversy over the extent to which scientific and technical merit alone should determine what gets funded.

A working group on "comprehensive merit evaluation and research facilities" proposed that technical review for facilities grants should be broader than that for research grants, taking into account such factors as "local capabilities and aspirations" and "social, economic and political considerations." John R. Silber, president of Boston University, made a strong pitch for this approach, which, he said, "acknowledges complexity where complexity exists." Silber also defended the $19-million appropriation Boston University got last year for its new Science and Engineering Center, saying the university didn't "bypass" anything because there were no peer review procedures to bypass. Said he: "the real pork barrel in scientific research is the system that benefits the very research universities that have been loudest in claiming the purity of peer review." As Alvin Trivelpiece of the Department of Energy observed: "to some, peer review means Harvard and MIT get it all."

"Comprehensive merit evaluation," however, drew strong criticism from some conference attendees, who felt that since political considerations inevitably play a part in the process, there was no need to incorporate them into merit review. AAAS Executive Officer William Carey complained that "the introduction of a new term in competition with peer review" only has the effect of "muddying the water," and characterized the approach as "shove, and push, and cut a deal . . . a situation where it's every man for himself." Frederick Seitz, retired president of Rockefeller University, warned that "if you open this door of fence-jumping too wide . . . it will become very, very wide," and politicization will invade merit review across the board.

Many scientists find themselves in a difficult position because they don't want to muck around in politics, but they are going to have to in order to expand research budgets and avoid further fragmentation within the community. They have learned to sprinkle their rhetoric abundantly with the Administration's favorite terms: "economic competitiveness" and "national security." But as Representative Buddy MacKay (D–Fla.) pointed out, they are still strangely passive when it comes to cultivating potential allies. "For the first time, the private sector recognizes that its interests are the same as yours," MacKay told the group, urging them to make "common cause" with state officials, corporations, and public interest people. MacKay also warned that "if they see an irreversible move to the pork barrel they are no longer your supporters"—rather, they will be competitors with superior skills when it comes to "reaching for the levers of power."

Everyone at the conference agreed that the facilities problem varies from place to place and the solutions must be multiple. But not much in the way of bold, fresh thinking was expressed. At least one participant, biophysicist Donald M. Engelman of Yale University, wondered why he was there. Said he: "If we all agree that individual research grants are most important and should not be reduced unduly and that there is no more money available, what's the point of talking about facilities funding?"

Nonetheless, the pork barrel issue may turn out to be a crucial one in mobilizing the scientific community on behalf of the notion that a thriving research infrastructure is essential for a healthy nation. Moreover, warned MacKay, "unless we expand this nation's commitment to basic research you are going to be at each others' throats."—**CONSTANCE HOLDEN**

*See *Science*, 16 Dec. 1983, p. 1211.