

BIG SCIENCE

SSC Deathwatch Starts Again

It has become a virtual rite of spring. As the grass turns green around the Superconducting Super Collider (SSC) construction site in Waxahachie, Texas, the accelerator's foes in Washington gear up for their annual effort to kill the project. This year, they believe they have their best chance yet to complete the task.

Last week, the House Science, Space and Technology Committee held a hearing to set the stage for the upcoming battle, and the signs for the SSC were not good. Even some of the project's supporters on the committee indicated that they may balk at new cost estimates for the project. President Clinton has stretched out the SSC's completion date by 3 years to 2003, ostensibly "to ensure that all components of this project are technologically effective." (SSC officials had testified previously that no problems requiring such a delay existed.) And the congressional General Accounting Office testified at last week's hearing that this delay will raise the SSC's total construction cost to over \$11 billion—more than twice the amount estimated when the project was first proposed to Congress in 1987. Although this latest increase was not unexpected, Representatives Robert Walker (R-PA) and Harris Fawell (R-IL), took the opportunity of the hearing to announce that they were reconsidering their support, for financial and other concerns.

Nor did the Administration alleviate legislators' worries about another aspect of the project: the lack of international support. When the Bush Administration left early this year, it informed Congress that it was confident of receiving only \$400 million in foreign contributions (compared to its goal of \$1.7 billion) by 1999. Since then Japan, the main target of the collaboration negotiations, has put off any further discussions until Clinton's position becomes clear, which has temporarily slowed the search for collaborators. Department of Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary had been expected to update that last week with a written progress report on negotiations for further contributions, but at the last minute her staff told the committee that no letter would be coming in time for the hearing. Reporting this, a disappointed Walker concluded that "this may be the time when we have to pull the plug."

Last year, with an Administration in power that was strongly supportive of the SSC, the

House voted by a 118 majority to kill the project (it was eventually saved in the Senate). This year, the project's supporters are not sure they can even count on the Administration's firm backing.

Although Clinton has endorsed the SSC in speeches, one Republican congressional staffer, noting the delay and accompanying cost rise, says, "If I was making a partisan argument, I'd say the Clinton Administration was setting the SSC up to die." Indeed, the project's backers fear that

the Administration's support may weaken after a special election in Texas later this month to fill the Senate seat that Lloyd Bentsen vacated when he became Clinton's treasury secretary.

One of the SSC's opponents, Representative Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY), has already introduced a bill (HR-70) to withhold further funds for the project, and it has gained

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some 60 co-sponsors. But a Boehlert aide says this is a mostly symbolic move and the real execution attempt will probably come with an amendment to strip SSC funding from the House energy and water appropriations bill, as legislators did last year.

Even such a stalwart SSC backer as science committee chairman George Brown (D-CA) gives the odds of the project surviving this year as about even, but he notes that in these deficit-cutting times the debate has become economic, not scientific. "If money were no object, there would be no debate on the SSC," he said.

With the project's prospects again looking poor in the House, SSC supporters are already focusing on the Senate for the real battle. For the SSC to survive, congressional aides say, Senator Bennett Johnston (D-LA), chairman of the energy and water appropriations subcommittee, will have to deliver the votes. Last year Johnston was able to muster a strong 66-33 margin in favor of the project. But this year, says a Johnston aide, "times have changed. There's a mood of cost cutting and the environment is not good for any big project. It's going to be an uphill battle." The SSC's survival, says another Senate aide, may hinge on Clinton's willingness to go to bat for it.

—Christopher Anderson

TECHNOLOGY POLICY

Good to Take Top Commerce Post

Mary Good, a senior Allied Signal Inc. executive and the former chair of the National Science Foundation's (NSF) National Science Board, was nominated last week to be under secretary of commerce for technology. Coming less than a week after John Rollwagen, formerly the CEO of supercomputer-maker Cray Research Inc., withdrew as the nominee for deputy secretary of commerce, the appointment makes Good the Commerce Department's top technology official—a prestigious post in an Administration that has made technology one of its top priorities.

Good, a chemist, had been one of President Clinton's top candidates to become the next NSF director, but she turned down the job in favor of the Commerce post, according to sources close to the selection process. Her experience has mostly been in applied research, and she had reportedly been disappointed with the science community's opposition to former NSF director Walter Massey's attempt to push the agency more in the applied direction. (Good did not return calls seeking comment.)

At Commerce, Good, when confirmed by the Senate, will oversee several of the research programs that Clinton has singled out as the focus of his technology policy, includ-

ing the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) and its Advanced Technology Program, which provides matching grants to industry to develop and commercialize technologies. Clinton has declared his intention to increase the NIST budget more than five-fold over the next 4 years.

Erich Bloch, the former NSF director who is now a fellow with the Council on Competitiveness, notes that Good "is in a much better environment than [Robert White, her predecessor in the Bush Administration] was." Citing Good's "energy, experience, and new ideas," Bloch hopes that Clinton will expand her role into international trade and competitiveness issues—areas that Rollwagen would have overseen had he remained at Commerce. Clinton had nominated Rollwagen to the number two slot at Commerce, and he had been expected to play a key role in technology policy. But after an insider-trading probe related to his former company delayed his confirmation hearing, Rollwagen withdrew last month. He explained that the delay (during which he worked at Commerce as a consultant) had given him enough government experience to know he didn't like it. Blaming "culture shock" he told reporters he intended to return to industry, but not to Cray.

—Christopher Anderson