leadership skills required to manage a big institution on a wide public stage. Although he has never done anything like this before, he has handled some hot research policy issues and enjoys the limelight.

In the mid-1980s, for example, Varmus mediated a wrangle over the naming of the AIDS virus, chairing a committee that settled on human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV. A colleague at UCSF, Jay Levy, says Varmus handled the negotiations so adeptly that committee members were able to do all their business by fax and phone, without wasting time on travel. With Kirschner, he's helped organize symposiums for a group in Congress called the Biomedical Caucus. Staffers and members of Congress get together about once a month to meet big-name researchers and hear their views on current topics. And along with William Richardson, the president of Johns Hopkins University, Varmus breathed life into a group called the New Delegation on Biomedical Research and hammered out a common position endorsed by both scientists and university officials on how the government should deal with indirect cost reimbursement for grants. This show of consensus paid off when White House budget officials revised the guidelines on indirect costs (circular A-21) in 1992 and 1993 and incorporated some of the New Delegation's proposals in the new rules. Richardson, who later served on the search committee that chose Varmus for the NIH job, says he was impressed with Varmus' skills as a natural consensus builder and leader.

Finally, in the last year, Varmus has became directly involved in one of the thorniest issues to hit cancer research in a long time—the Senate's earmarking of $210 million for breast cancer studies funded through the U.S. Army. Varmus sat on an Institute of Medicine panel that drew up a set of recommendations for how the money should be spent. The process introduced him to the breast cancer activists, a familiarity that may help him in the coming months as he meets "a lot more...people who are interested in specific diseases."

The next stop for Varmus is the Senate's Labor and Human Resources Committee. The committee is waiting for the FBI to complete its check and for a separate "background check." When these are done, the paperwork will be sent to the Senate, which will send yet another investigator to quiz Varmus. The nominee will then meet privately with committee members, and after that, he will undergo a public hearing. Committee aides say this won't take place before the end of September. Then comes a vote in the Senate. It all takes time. But with solid support in the biomedical community and scant political opposition, his nomination seems headed for pretty smooth sailing.

–Eliot Marshall

SUPERCONDUCTING SUPER COLLIDER

DOE Pulls Plug on SSC Contractor

From the start, the Superconducting Super Collider (SSC) has been an academic project in every sense: designed, built, and eventually to be operated by companies and researchers working under a consortium of 79 universities called Universities Research Association (URA). No longer. Last week, Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary took the job of building the $11 billion accelerator away from URA and announced plans to give it to a company more experienced with large construction projects. Clinton Administration officials hope that the change, which followed highly publicized investigations into URA's accounting and management procedures, will help convince the Senate to vote next month to preserve the accelerator and the House of Representatives to reverse its earlier vote to kill the project.

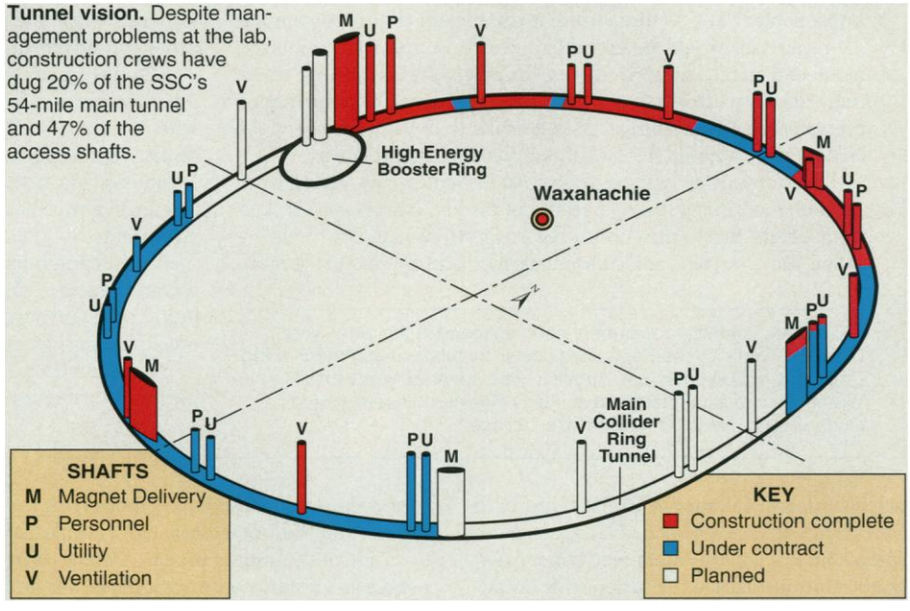
URA, which was formed in 1965 to build and operate the Fermilab particle accelerator, will still have a role in the project, overseeing the design of the SSC and managing its operation as a scientific laboratory. But overseeing actual construction of the 54-mile ring—a task that has been the source of most of the management complaints and is now about 20% completed—will go to a new contractor, yet to be named. "URA is retained to do what it does best: research and development, scientific design, and management and operations of scientific facilities," O'Leary testified last week at a Senate hearing on the project.

O'Leary said that a 30-day review by the Department of Energy (DOE) confirmed what SSC officials have long insisted, that the project was on time and on budget. But the review also found lapses, including the fact that an approved accounting system to control cost and schedule overruns is more than a year overdue and still deficient, that baseline costs and schedules have been "inconsistent," and that the lab has done a poor job of anticipating labor shortages. Alarmed by the absence of solid accounting to show that the lab is within budget, auditors such as the congressional General Accounting Office have predicted large cost overruns. But O'Leary said that the DOE review turned up no such budget problems.

"In general, URA has fallen short of providing the level of managerial oversight necessary," O'Leary testified. But she told Congress that the SSC, which 6 months ago she confessed failed to excite her "passion," was now indispensable. "The project must go forward," she said.

DOE officials hope to select a new lead contractor this fall and are looking for a company with experience in large construction projects. Two possible candidates are Bechtel Corp. and Martin Marietta Corp., both current subcontractors for portions of the SSC construction. DOE and URA officials expect that the transition will not take more than a few months, a delay that would be absorbed by the 3-year project extension that President Bill Clinton imposed earlier this year to improve the chance of finding foreign partners. The cost of the change, O'Leary said, would be "de minimus" compared to the overall project cost and should be recouped in future management savings.

Speaking last month to his staff, laboratory director Roy Schwitters hinted at the DOE decision when he reassured employees



that day-to-day activities would not be affected by a change in contractors. In past cases of contractor changes at other DOE labs, he said, "the colors of the ID cards and paychecks may have changed, but the majority of the people have remained in their positions." DOE officials expect most of the SSC management staff to be rehired by the new contractor.

Since URA will operate the project when it is completed, it will retain control over the director's position, and URA president John Toll says that URA is reviewing the performance of Schwitters and other managers. Last week, *The Washington Post* obtained a leaked memo in which DOE's SSC project manager, Joseph Cipriano, recommends the firing of Schwitters. Beginning with a sarcastic reference to "Our beloved contractor, Universities Research Association," the memo concludes that removing Schwitters "may be the only way to keep the lab from falling apart before the Senate votes." DOE officials say that the memo represents Cipriano's personal thoughts and does not reflect agency policy. Cipriano was on vacation and unavailable for comment, and Schwitters says that he has not been asked to resign.

In announcing the changes, O'Leary emphasized that the project has passed all its technical hurdles and is on track. But URA's management shortcomings had left the project open to attack. "Some will argue that implementing these changes is an acknowledgement of existing problems," she said. "It is." But she added that it would be worse "to know that the problems exist and do nothing to fix them."

–Christopher Anderson

ACADEMIC EARMARKS

Report Takes Aim at 50 New Projects

Delta College had a problem. Its planetarium, visited annually by thousands of elementary school students in the three-county area surrounding Bay City, Michigan, was more than 30 years old and no longer able to impress young minds with the wonders of the cosmos. The 2-year community college couldn't afford to build a new one, so Delta officials asked a local congressman, Bob Traxler (D–MI), for help. They went to the right person: Traxler was chairman of the House appropriations subcommittee that funds such research agencies as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the National Science Foundation (NSF), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). While Traxler and his subcommittee were slashing hundreds of millions from the budget requests of those and other agencies, the chairman managed to find $8 million in the 1993 NASA budget (added to $750,000 allocated in the previous year) for a new planetarium at Delta, the first one that NASA has ever built.

Traxler, who retired from Congress in January after 18 years in office, was following an increasingly well-worn path of serving his constituents in higher education. In 1992 alone, Congress allocated more than $700 million for such projects, and the total for the past decade exceeds $2.4 billion. That's too much for Representative George Brown (D–CA), the chairman of the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee, who vowed earlier this year to conduct a campaign to end the practice (*Science*, 19 February, p. 1117). This week Brown released the first product of that campaign, an interim report based on a survey requesting more information on 50 such projects funded last year by Congress, Delta's planetarium among them.

"The government and the taxpayer are the real losers as a result of this practice," Brown writes. "Politics as usual, in its most self-serving form, will destroy a collective effort to insure that our research agenda meets priority needs and invests our scarce resources wisely." Brown also believes that the practice undermines the power of authorizing committees, such as his science committee, and strengthens the hand of the appropriations committee, whose 13 subcommittees oversee the entire federal budget. Authorizing committees are supposed to approve new programs and chart a broad path for federal agencies to follow, while the appropriations committee approves each agency's actual budget. Earmarks inserted by the appropriations committees cut the authorizing committees out of the action by spending money on projects that have not even been debated, much less authorized.

The survey by the science committee asked university presidents to explain the nature of each project being funded, the extent to which it was subjected to outside review, and whether it was requested by the relevant federal agency or authorized by Congress. In his report, Brown describes institutional responses ranging from smugness to not-too-subtle signals that they have powerful friends. Then there were those, presumably including Peter Boyse, the president of Delta College, who, Brown notes, "simply seemed baffled by the questions." "We are not clear of the meaning attached to the words 'peer review' and 'merit review,'" wrote Boyse. "The project was discussed, reviewed, and modified by several science teachers in the area, as well as by school administrators."

The interim report could be embarrassing to some members of the science establishment, whose institutions have benefited from earmarks at the same time they have publicly condemned the practice. As chairman of the National Science Board, which oversees NSF, James Duderstadt has repeatedly warned that earmarks threaten the government's attempt to support the best science. But as president of the University of Michigan, Duderstadt was forced to explain why Michigan has received $700,000 since 1990 from a consortium of universities conducting a study of ozone air pollution. The consortium, based at the University of Miami and known as the Southern Oxidants Study, has been awarded $6.5 million in the past 2 years, and Michigan officials pointed out to Brown that their school was only a minor subcontractor.

In another example, Richard Atkinson, a former NSF director who is now chancellor of the University of California, San Diego, justified a $1.6 million earmark for work on advanced composite materials by arguing that the project is a "unique way to advance the goals of defense conversion and regional economic development"—not academic research at all. Brown's report also lists a $2.1 million payment for an agricultural biotechnology and genetics building at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, part of $17 million that the university has been awarded in the past decade through earmarks. Until December its chancellor was Donna Shalala, now secretary of Health and Human Services, which includes the National Institutes of Health.

In conducting his crusade, Brown is stepping on the toes of some powerful members of Congress. The chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Senator Robert Byrd (D–WV), for example, has been a major figure in funneling $100 million in the past decade to the University of West Virginia and the 1000-student Wheeling Jesuit College. But Brown says he's willing to pay the political price in return for reforms discussed in the report that would make earmarking more difficult, if not impossible. His report, for example, calls for a change in House rules prohibiting the appropriations committee from funding projects that have not been authorized, and it encourages agencies in the meantime to reject earmarks added to their appropriations bills with language that is not legally binding. "I am aware that this report runs the risk of offending respected colleagues or unfairly criticizing an institution performing important public services," writes Brown. "If I have so offended, I apologize. I only ask that the readers consider the larger issues we have tried to highlight."

–Jeffrey Mervis