

McClintock proposal: Invest \$4.1 million in observatory upkeep

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ARECIBO

Senate President Kenneth McClintock proposed Wednesday setting aside \$4.1 million from future government bond issues for infrastructure projects that would extend the life of the Arecibo Observatory, the world's largest dish radio telescope.

"With this funding, we hope to prove that ...

this facility is a priority for us," McClintock said during a news conference at the observatory, which he described as "one of the wonders of the world."

José López, the observatory's director of educational programs, said he hopes the repairs bring the message to Washington that the facility is being rejuvenated and would need little funding for its yearly maintenance. That, in turn, will make officials think twice about shutting it down.

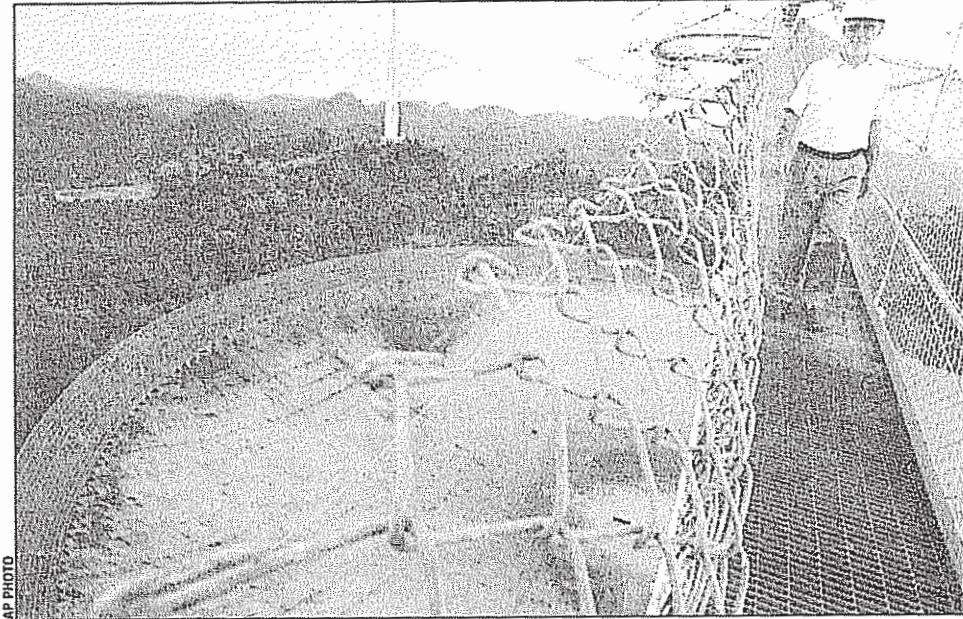
"If the facility [is] in decay and deteriorated, they will shut it down. This brings the message that the radio telescope is rejuvenated and can give 10 to 20 more years and that it needs little maintenance," he said.

The Arecibo Observatory is part of the National Astronomy and Ionosphere Center, which is operated by Cornell University in conjunction with the National Science Foundation, a federal entity whose goal is to promote the advancement of science and engineering.

A senior review panel from the NSF in November recommended raising \$30 million for future astronomy projects and facilities by slashing current funding to programs and facilities.

The panel's report suggested that unless the observatory finds outside funding, it should close sometime after 2011. The panel also recommended cutting funding to the Arecibo observatory and a number of other national observatories by 20 percent to 25 percent over the next four years.

The scientific community has expressed



AP PHOTO

Robert L. Brown, director of the National Astronomy and Ionosphere Center, walks along a walkway suspended hundreds of feet above the Arecibo Observatory in November, after a review panel for the National Science Foundation recommended steep budget cuts and eventual closure of the facility.

concern over the decision, stating that the NSF could be endangering the world: The radiotelescope in Arecibo is the most sensitive and is used to study asteroids that threaten the earth.

Tim Hankins, observatory director, said he had to slash 11 of its 144-member staff just before the Christmas season as part of an effort to raise money to paint the platform of the dish. Some 200 visiting professors and researchers use the facility.

"We remain optimistic," he said.

López said the observatory has a \$12 million yearly budget, but \$10 million, which is at risk of getting slashed, is geared for astronomical programs.

McClintock announced plans to set aside \$3.27 million from the next government bond issue to clean up and paint three towers and suspension cables of the radiotelescope.

Afterwards, he said, lawmakers will set aside \$875,000 from a subsequent bond issue to purchase a new electric power generator for the observatory. He said the projects were

deemed the most needed by Cornell officials.

Senate Vice President Orlando Parga noted that the current electrical system is out of compliance.

McClintock also suggested taking out \$250,000 from the government budget to pay for research and student internships to be managed by the University of Puerto Rico.

He said he did not expect opposition from either the House or the executive branch, since officials have already expressed their support to keep the facility opened.

The next bond issue that the Legislature will evaluate is the \$530 million one that was put on hold during the last special session.

Asked why the UPR Mayagüez campus does not take control of the facility, López clarified that every number of years, the NSF puts out bids for colleges to manage the facility and that in the last one, Cornell and another university were the sole bidders.

"I am sure UPR, if it wants to, can compete," he said.



STAR FILE PHOTO

Senate President Kenneth McClintock