

Cost-cuts may threaten observatory's future

But Arecibo facility officials certain closure won't occur

BY JON RUST

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Although a review panel for the National Science Foundation has recommended the possible closure of the Arecibo radio telescope in 2011, program officials said Tuesday they have little doubt that the unique and powerful facility will continue to operate for many years.

This month, a panel recommended to the NSF that the radio telescope, the largest and most sensitive in the world, be shut down in five years unless alternative financing is obtained, as part of \$30 million in cost-cutting measures aimed at revitalizing the foundation's programs.

The Arecibo Observatory recommendations, however, are based largely on the flawed premise that current astronomical surveys will be completed in five years, said Joe Burns, vice provost for physical sciences and engineering at Cornell University, which operates the Arecibo telescope for the NSF, as well as a planetary radar system used to track and study asteroids that have the potential to slam into the earth.

The radar — the best in world — is not even mentioned in the Nov. 3 recommendations, Burns said. That program, which costs about \$1 million a year, is also congressionally mandated, Burns added.

"There were flaws in the [review] process," he told The STAR by phone. "Certainly the closure will not occur."

Meanwhile, the radio telescope remains the largest and most sensitive in the world, and it can continue to make valuable contributions for many years, he said.

"We believe we have a lot of good science left to do," he said.

The "major flawed premise" in the recommendations is that current astronomical surveys will be completed in 2011, but officials say they will actually take another decade and that new findings will require additional research.

Meanwhile, the NSF is providing \$5 million for a program in 2007 to clean and repaint the telescope, which will extend its life for 20 to 25 years.

"That makes the point right there — you don't get your house in order for the next 25 years if you're planning to abandon it in [a few] years," Burns said.

A window to the solar system

Completed in 1963, the largest and most sensitive radio tele-



STAR FILE PHOTO

Despite a panel's recommendation to close the facility in five years, the Arecibo Observatory is set to undergo a \$5 million investment next year to clean and repaint its radio telescope, which will extend its life for 20 to 25 years.

scope in the world is used by scientists from around the globe to study the solar system. It is visited by 120,000 people a year, and is a scientific educational tool for local students. It's also an "icon" for technology in Puerto Rico, Burns noted.

In addition to the possible closure, the panel has called for a budget cut of 25 percent in Arecibo, to \$8 million, which Cornell says would require cutting back on operations and personnel. About 200 people, mostly islanders, work at the observatory.

If the NSF agrees with the panel, cuts would be done primarily through voluntary retirement and the freezing of open positions.

Cornell officials, meanwhile, will meet with Resident Commissioner Luis Fortuño next week in Washington to discuss the issue, Burns said, adding that Cornell is in talks with NASA about alternative funding.

As part of its review of the panel's recommendations, the NSF

also plans to visit Arecibo next month as well as get input from the scientific community.

The American Astronomical Society has spoken out against the Arecibo recommendations, saying that a shutdown could even endanger the earth.

The panel "appears to have overlooked an aspect of [the observatory's] work that is in fact of major importance to the planetary community: its unique abilities as a tool in studying solar system bodies, especially near-Earth asteroids, by radar," Guy Consolmagno, head of the society's Division for Planetary Sciences, said in a statement last week.

The panel's findings "make no mention at all" of the asteroids and "near-Earth objects" that are studied using the Arecibo facilities.

"To decommission one of our primary tools for studying them would deal a serious blow to both our science and our safety," he said.

Báez Galib bill would legalize same-sex unions

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Popular Democratic Party Sen. Eudaldo Báez Galib introduced legislation on Tuesday that would legalize same-sex



establishing the division of their property once the partnership is dissolved.

He said his bill will go to the committee in charge of revising the Civil Code, and from there he could force its evaluation.

Right now, one of the two Civil Code

are not ready to accept the concept.

"I was afraid doing so would destroy the possibility we could have domestic partnerships," he said.

Báez Galib said that under his bill one