

**Notes from meeting with Ed Seidel at the NSF – 2010
Jan 08 – M&PS Conference Room**

Present: (NSF) Ed Seidel, Craig Foltz, Dana Lehr

(ASAP) Tim Hankins, John Meriwether, Dan Stinebring

These are some notes from our meeting with Edward Seidel (Assistant Director (Acting) Math & Physical Sciences Directorate at the NSF), Craig Foltz (acting head of the Astronomy Division), and Dana Lehr (Astronomy Division – Program Manager for NAIC Arcibo). These notes are intended only for the ASAP Membership; we request that they not be circulated. The notes are not in any particular order, nor do they reflect the progression of the meeting conversations.

A summary: it was a frank meeting. The three NSF representatives were engaged in the conversation and were clearly interested in our viewpoint as representatives of ASAP. However, it also seems clear that they have made their basic decisions:

1) The Arcibo Observatory (henceforth, AO) will remain open for the foreseeable future,

2) AST will support AO at a level that is reduced from, say, five years ago, but it will be a level that they see as viable – they feel heavily constrained to respond to the Senior Review. See the note about the National Science Board (NSB) below.

3) GEO/AGS (the atmospheric sciences division) will increase their support from \$2M to \$3M since they have a strong interest in the AO staying open and healthy.

We presented the case for the AO. The three of us were, in our own ways, passionate about the quality of AO science and clear that the AO was already a very lean operation – in fact starving. We also emphasized that the continuing delay of the release of the solicitation for proposals for the Management and Operation Contract (henceforth, RFP for Request For Proposals) was harming the Observatory greatly. There was no finger-pointing on this issue, though, since we understood before the meeting that they also see this as an acute problem.

Basically, we made the point that unless the RFP offers viable support, the entire process could fail. They seemed well aware of this danger and Dana Lehr mentioned that they will have a review process for evaluating responses to the RFP, but our assessment of viable and theirs may well differ.

Some other points ...

Both the AST and GEO/AGS Divisions (from informal sessions before and after the Seidel meeting) are caught up with the idea that different management structure could make a significant difference in the cost of operating the AO. NSF has had third-party assessments by management consultants to estimate the cost of operating AO at a “reduced scope”. The reports of these consultants are apparently not public. This term, “reduced scope”, kept coming up over and over, but it was not clear what they wish to reduce.

NSF is going to stick with the recommendations of the Senior Review (SR). They’re dealing with the NSB, who looks to the SR as “good stewardship”, and apparently has dictated to NSF or at least to Seidel, that they must comply with the SR recommendations.

They are convinced of the scientific quality of Arcibo and our “passion for the science” was duly acknowledged.

Foltz claimed that AST is “boxed in” by the practicalities of doing new great science. He also made the statement, seconded by Seidel, that the fraction (55%) of the AST budget that goes into facility operations is the highest in all of NSF, that physics is second and “a long way down from AST”. Seidel said, “We can’t afford to have this increase any higher; if we do, then we hear criticisms from all sides.”

The *implication* is that this is a justification for reducing the support for facilities.

Foltz mentioned several times that other sources of funding should be found. He used the example of the VLBA, which has gotten support from GONG and NRL [?].

Tim made the point that NAIC is a national observatory and therefore should be funded by the National Science Foundation. This got no response.

Foltz brought up the “40 years of one management structure” – couldn’t we find some new way of running the AO if someone else was doing it?

[Tim missed an opportunity for rebuttal here. NRAO has been run by AUI since it was founded in 1956, which is almost 15 years prior to the NSF takeover of the AO.]

We offered our opinions about the SR: that it was not based on solid evidence; no true argument behind the

“closing Arecibo” sentences, etc.; NSF was nodding in agreement and otherwise concurring, but they clearly feel *stuck with it*. Apparently the NSF is “holding NSF’s feet to the fire” to comply with the SR recommendations.

The Senior Review Report gets held up as a paragon of management practice; the NSF people in the room agreed that it was *viewed this way* (even if they did not share that view).

John stated that a major payoff of scientific productivity could take place if NSF could make a marginal increase in the funding. [This has been reiterated by several of our friendly “anonymous” sources of advice.]

Foltz mentioned the Shapiro report on Near Earth Objects (pending in the next few months – there is an interim report out there). He didn’t state explicitly that this would likely be positive for the future of AO.

Dana Lehr: “a glorious instrument” – she also said that it is well recognized that Arecibo is doing excellent science.

Dan mentioned the star party on the White House lawn and asked about the Obama effect. The NSF people responded that this was somewhat positive with respect to future science, but there are *many* layers between the White House lawn and their NSF realities. Many hands get in the works in between.

Ed Seidel is supportive of the science we’re doing – he said that gravitational physics is (obviously) “near and dear to my heart”.

In response to questioning about the impact of the delayed release of the RFP, Foltz said over and over that they’re aware of the human issues for the staff at Arecibo. We heard no explanation or justification for the delay.

Tim: What will happen to the telescope?

Foltz: That’s not our job – that’s the community’s job.

Tim pointed out, with examples, that there has always been a positive attitude about new/novel science at Arecibo, whereas NRAO/VLA has been much more rigid in its support for new ideas. Tim expressed his hope that this attitude could continue at AO. Foltz responded with the complaint that this might cost more.

We feel that we presented ASAP’s viewpoints reasonably well.

Points we didn’t get a chance to make:

* That we three are not demographically representative of the AO users. That is, there is a generation of new scientists who are out there doing science and teaching classes right now. We would like them to have similar opportunities that we had to test their ideas.

* NAIC made some sacrifices to paint the suspended structure of the AO telescope to save NSF’s butt from a possible disastrous failure of the steel structure.