

Tim Hankins commentary on the meeting between ASAP and NSF, January 8, 2010

Our meeting at NSF was aided by timely conversations with Don Campbell and some “old friends” in the ATM/GEO Division. At this point Don feels that for the short term the AO is adequately funded. The contributions from AST and ATM/GEO this year and initially in the coming year as will probably appear in the RFP, plus some quasi-earmarked funding (\$2M) from NASA, carryover funds, plus some infrastructure monies from the Puerto Rican government and the ARRA stimulus package will allow the AO to operate at about the same level as it has for the last two years. It is clear to me and to others, that a small increment in the budget could make a large difference in the “comfort” and productivity of the AO, and we made that point to the NSF.

My speculation on what “reduced scope” means to AST: It is pretty clear that without extra money from NASA or somewhere else, that the planetary radar program will have to be curtailed. As they have for several years now, it looks like NSF is playing hardball with NASA with regard to the funding of the planetary radar program. “Reduced scope” may mean to NSF, delete the planetary radar program. I just found the Shapiro interim report on Near-Earth Object Surveys and Hazard Mitigation Strategies (http://books.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=12738&page=1, though there may be better sources). It isn't in an easily readable form, but on the first page are five “Findings”, the third of which is, “Finding: The Arecibo Observatory telescope continues to play a unique role in characterization of NEOs, providing unmatched precision and accuracy in orbit determination and insight into size, shape, surface structure, multiplicity, and other physical properties for objects within its declination coverage and detection range.” The supporting material and examples later in the document are very favorable for the AO.

There are comments in our notes about the NSB pressuring NSF to abide by the SR recommendations. NSF probably feels that they are “responding to the community” by following the SR recommendations. We pointed out that the SR was flawed, but we didn't get into specifics – NSF has certainly heard these things before. I feel that NSF should pay attention to ASAP, as a voice of the community, and carry our interests upward. After all, shouldn't funding for science be driven by those who do it, rather than having it come from the top down? This thought was echoed by one of the AST/GEO people who feels very frustrated special programs that are handed down by the Administration to NSF which is then told to fund them.

It may be that our meeting has at least moved the RFP a little. We heard (not from the AST people!) that a draft of the RFP had appeared on some desks in ATM/GEO the morning of our meeting. Coincidence?

Dan, John and I have had several discussions about what ASAP should do next. My opinion: We send them a polite thank you note for their time, we repeat our statement that ASAP is available to help the process of recompetition, and we repeat our independence from any competing party. John will try to have an informal chat with an NSB member to ask what ASAP can do. Other than that, we will probably have to sit tight until we see the RFP.

PS: The short articles in *Nature* and *Physics Today* about the search for gravity waves using the pulsar timing array that appeared today and this month, respectively, could hardly be more timely.