WASHINGTON NEWS

Smithsonian's Materials Research Center Gets One-Year Reprieve from Congress

Citing the need to reallocate financial resources to higher-priority activities, the Smithsonian Institution has been attempting to close its unique Center for Materials Research and Education (SCMRE) and to terminate the jobs of the center's 29 staff members, including six research chemists and five materials-related scientists. However, Congress has temporarily interrupted the center's closedown, which was scheduled to take place by December 31, and has extended its operations through September 30, 2002 (fiscal year 2002). Most of the staff members have decided to stay for the time being.

Phase-out of ongoing programs at the center, which is located in Suitland, Md., outside Washington, D.C., had begun last July. Although at first SCMRE cancelled most of its planned engagements, including the training courses offered to museum conservators, the center's activities are being restarted and its contractual obligations are being fulfilled. The center is also restoring some of its collaborative projects and is considering once again accepting applications for fellowships or internships.

The center was established in 1963 to analyze and conserve the Smithsonian's widespread collections. In 1983, SCMRE was moved to its present location in Suitland, and its mission was expanded to include independent research and education programs involving the study and conservation of collection materials. It also began serving materials conservation needs for other institutions, both across the United States and abroad. According to its mission statement, the purpose of SCMRE is "to increase and disseminate scientific knowledge that contributes to improved preservation and conservation of museum collections and related materials and to the enhancement of their contextual interpretation."

The attempted shutdown of the center was ordered by Smithsonian secretary Lawrence M. Small. The action was taken on the recommendation of the undersecretary for science, Dennis O'Connor. According to the secretary's spokesperson, David Umansky, the undersecretary had determined that much of the center's work was being duplicated by the individual museums. Also, Small had been attempting to focus the institution's activities more on exhibitions and public programs than on non-museum-related research. This approach has proved controversial, as it did earlier this year when Small also attempted to close the Smithsonian's Endangered Species Research Center in Front Royal, Va. A strong negative public and political response eventually caused Congress to overrule Small and force him to reverse his decision.

The same has apparently happened with SCMRE. Although the center's shutdown initially appeared to be certain, the Senate intervened in September and extended the center's operations. This action was initiated by Sen. Paul Sarbanes, D-Md., who succeeded in restoring SCMRE's FY 2002 appropriation and directed the Smithsonian secretary to establish a committee of scientists to consider the issue. Small has complied with the directive. He established an 18-member science commission that will prepare a report on the issue and submit it directly to the Smithsonian's Board of Regents. The report will be sent directly to Congress. This turn of events is a small victory for the relatively low-profile entity, with its meager $3.2 million annual budget. Yet, according to the center's staffers, SCMRE represents a unique and perhaps irreplaceable resource in terms of its body of knowledge in maintaining and preserving the material components of priceless objects and collections.

Martha Goodway, a metallurgist who has worked at the center since 1970, said the Smithsonian—as well as other museums and research institutions across the country—may be hard-pressed to find an

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adequate replacement for the facility.

"The Smithsonian has the most comprehensive collections in the world," Goodway said. "Because the collections are the most comprehensive, we have to deal with all sorts of materials problems." Such problems can range from analysis of the aluminum wing spar of an antique aircraft to organic infestation of a biological sample. But the experience gained from all of SCMRE's work can be applied to other museums around the world—most of which lack the center's expertise.

"People may not realize that a lot of what we do applies to authentication," said Goodway, who also describes herself as an "archaeometallurgist." As an example, she described an analysis SCMRE performed of a supposed rare metal casting from Africa. Flaws were discovered in the object that rendered it inauthentic and far less valuable than expected, thus saving the Internal Revenue Service thousands of dollars that would have otherwise been claimed as a tax deduction.

The center has also saved its parent institution a good deal of money on specimen storage and exhibit environmental requirements. Goodway said that SCMRE's research has discovered that temperature and humidity standards do not have to be as severe as previously thought, thereby reducing costs for both energy and construction materials. Although such achievements have engendered loyalty to SCMRE by the Smithsonian's individual museum directors, Goodway said, many have not been in a position to fight for the center's continued existence. "Most are either retiring or have resigned," she said.

Perhaps the largest potential impact of closing the center would be long-term. The center maintains an archive of all its research and much of the research involves aging of materials. At this point, according to Goodway, the fate of the archive is uncertain.

"The basic objectives of the museum require us to take a very long perspective," she said. "We need to do this because in the future we may need to answer questions we can't even dream of today." Goodway also stressed the importance of preserving baseline data on all the materials that have been studied at the center. "This is not a job for the impatient," she said.

PHIL BERARDELLI

Tech Talent Bill Introduced

U.S. Senators Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.), Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.), Christopher Bond (R-Mo.), William Frist (R-Tenn.), and Pete Domenici (R-N.M.) introduced last month the "Tech Talent bill," aimed at increasing the number of scientists, engineers, and technologists in the United States. A companion bill by House Science Chair Sherwood L. Boehlert (R-NY) and Rep. John B. Larson (D-Conn.) is in the House of Representatives.

To counteract a decline in the U.S. technical workforce, the legislation establishes a competitive grant program at the National Science Foundation that rewards universities, colleges, and community colleges pledging to increase the number of U.S. citizens or permanent residents obtaining degrees in science, math, engineering, and technology fields.

"The reality is that technological innovation is now widely understood to be the major driver of economic growth," Sen. Lieberman said.

Rep. Larson added, "In the wake of September 11, we must remember that there is a strong connection to be made between our national security and the level of science and technology proficiency in America."

The pilot program, which will award three-year grants, is authorized at $25 million in FY02 with funding expected to increase in the future. The sponsors estimate that a funding range of $200 million a year may be reached, depending on pilot program results. □

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