Berlin universities head off major new cuts in funding

Munich. Fears of a massive cut in funds for Berlin's three universities, which threatened to close entire faculties, slash student numbers and cut staff numbers by about a thousand over the next eight years, have been partially averted following prolonged negotiations with the city's political representatives.

Cuts will still have to be made. But they will not be as extensive as the DM135 million (US\$85 million) proposed by the city's finance ministry in March. The universities are now working with politicians to identify how much money could reasonably be saved and exactly where the savings could be made.

But it will still not be easy to reach agreement on where the extra cuts should fall, even though this has to be achieved by the end

Erhardt: sees problems ahead.

of the year in order for the budget for the two years 1995 and 1996 to become effective.

The three universities — The Free University and the Technical University in the west, and the east's Humboldt University — each fear that any further cuts, coming directly on top of severe restructuring agreed last year, could cause significant damage.

All three agree that rationalization was essential after German unification in 1990. The Free University, for example, was established in 1949 to replace the Humboldt University, and there is now an expensive overlap of many faculties and departments in the university system of the reunited city.

Reunification also meant the loss of Berlin's generous subsidy from Bonn — for many decades, the West German government had supported the many cultural activities of the isolated city in order to make it a flagship of democracy.

At the end of last year, the painful process of defining a new, cheaper structure for the three universities appeared to have come to an end when a restructuring plan was approved by Berlin's parliament. This plan would have cut costs by DM130 million a year by 2003 — at present the annual bill for universities is around DM4 billion, including building and equipment — by reducing total student numbers by 15,000 to 100,000, with a corresponding reduction in staff. The reduction would be achieved primarily by merging departments and faculties.

In March, however, the universities were told by the city's finance ministry that they would have to reduce their costs by a further

DM135 million over the same period because of the city's unexpectedly severe financial crisis.

Manfred Erhardt, Berlin's research minister, tried to call the Berlin senate's bluff. He wrote to the senate explaining that such radical cuts could be achieved only by closing whole faculties — he mentioned biology and veterinary medicine — and reducing student numbers still further, possibly by an additional 10,000. He explained that he needed to be sure before he took any steps that the senate would take political responsibility for such drastic moves.

When the contents of the letter became public, there was uproar. As a result, the senate's finance committee offered a compromise, based on a proposal from a recently established Parliamentary working group comprising Erhardt and the science spokesmen from the two main coalition parties: CDU spokesman Eberhard Engler, from the Max Delbrück Centre for Molecular Medicine and SPD spokesman Bert Flemming, a physiologist from the Humboldt university.

Engler and Flemming had argued that a less adversarial mechanism should be set up to identify how cuts could be made. This would be made by a committee made up of four politicians (representing both science and finance committees), four representatives from the universities, and Erhardt.

Erhardt says he is not convinced that the committee will work because it is likely to find it difficult to reach a consensus. But he welcomed the decision that there will be no further reduction in student numbers.

The committee will discuss what further savings the universities can make that will be acceptable to all parties. But its decisions will not be made until autumn at the very earliest. Jealousies are being stirred up between the three competing universities. The Free University, for example, resents the large amounts of money spent on being spent on refurbishing the dilapidated Humboldt University. The Humboldt in turn defends its investment programme on the grounds that it needs to be able to compete with the Free University on equal terms.

Furthermore, all three universities are unhappy that they are being asked to bear the full burden of Berlin's cuts in its science budget, while non-university research establishments are being left untouched.

Erhardt claims that this is because Berlin pays the full cost of its universities, whereas the federal government pays a fixed proportion of the costs of the research establishment, and that this money would be lost to the city if it made its own support for these.

Alison Abbott

Space station critics vow to maintain fight against project

Washington. Opponents of the United States' international space station, having decisively failed in this year's attempt to kill the project in Congress (see *Nature* 370, 3; 1994), remain confident that it will succumb in 1996 or 1997, when the federal budget will be even tighter.

"This year's budget is going to look like a picnic compared with 1996, 1997 and 1998," says Tim Roemer (Democrat, Indiana) who moved the unsuccessful amendment in the House of Representatives to kill the station. There is a widespread feeling that a legally imposed cap on overall discretionary spending means that far larger cuts will be required in those years.

The relatively large amount of room for manoeuvre present in this year's budget was graphically demonstrated last week when the Senate budget bill, which includes spending by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the National Science Foundation (NSF) was voted on in committee.

The Senate Veterans Affairs, Housing and Urban Development and independent agencies (VA-HUD) appropriations subcommittee, chaired by Barbara Mikulski (Democrat, Maryland), proposed budgets for NASA (\$14.4 billion) and NSF (\$3.45 billion) that are substantially above the president's requested level.

These budgets, which are likely to be approved by the full Senate, follow bartering between Mikulski and the White House, in the process of which she extracted an impressive list of concessions in exchange for her strong support of the space station.

The extra money has become available because the White House accepted adjustments in the housing budget that will relieve pressure on the rest of Mikulski's turf. The extra NSF money — \$300 million, compared to \$55 million requested — will be for construction of new laboratories and facilities, while NASA will get \$400 million that it had not requested to start building \$2.5 billion worth of wind tunnels.

The latter are immensely popular in Washington, as they are intended to help Boeing to compete with the European Airbus. Anyone suggesting that Boeing would be better off with a small wind tunnel and some computer simulation software does not understand how Congress works. Both Senate proposals have still to be agreed in conference with the House, but Senate staff say they now have the administration's support and are therefore likely to prevail.

Meanwhile Roemer is promising to subject NASA to ever-tighter scrutiny on the space station. He has inserted a provision in a House NASA authorization bill requiring ►

the agency to provide Congress with annual reports on how it is spending its space station money, and how the Russians are spending theirs.

"Dan Goldin [the administrator of NASA] has made some pretty grandiose promises which are going to be very difficult to live up to," says Roemer. "I'm going to hold him to these promises." He is also working with George Brown (Democrat, California), chairman of the House Science, Space and Technology Committee, on a provision in the bill that would cap annual station spending at its current level of \$2.1 billion.

Describing last month's vote in favour of the space station as "a temporary setback", Roemer concedes he made a tactical mistake in proposing that the station money go back into NASA, rather than making it a straight spending cut. "But I don't think it was one of the major reasons we lost," he says. "Probably in future, with the budget difficulties we face, a straight cut will be the way to go."

He does not see the 1995 vote as taking the project to the point where it cannot be cancelled. "We're talking about spending another \$50-\$55 billion on this," says Roemer. Very important projects such as Advanced X-Ray Astrophysics Facility, Cassini and Mars Surveyor may in fact be cancelled because of the space station. But for this year, as Mikulski's budget confirmed, these projects are safe.

Colin Macilwain

Warheads give boost to nuclear fuels

London. Uranium produced from the dismantling of nuclear warheads could provide up to 15 per cent of the world's supply of uranium fuel within ten years, according to forecasts made on behalf of the international uranium industry.

In a report published last week, the Uranium Institute, which is based in London, predicts that highly enriched uranium derived from obsolete nuclear weapons, and converted for use in commercial nuclear power plants, could be supplying between 5 and 15 per cent of world supplies over the next decade.

According to the institute, this supply will go some way to meeting the sharp rise in demand for uranium that it believes will take place in response to increasing global energy demands.

Under an arrangement reached with Russia in 1993, the United States has agreed to buy 500 tonnes of highly-enriched uranium resulting from the destruction of weapons. The destruction is itself one result of the START II treaty, signed by the then US president, George Bush, and his Russian counterpart, Boris Yeltsin, in 1993, in which both countries agreed to cut nuclear weapons by two-thirds.

Maggie Verrall

Locals seek strict controls over UCSF expansion plans

San Francisco. Plans by the space-starved University of California at San Francisco (UCSF) to build a new medical research complex on part of a former Army base in the city may have to meet stringent conditions laid down by local residents if they are to proceed with public support.

An alliance of nine neighbourhood groups is recommending several conditions to be attached to the UCSF plans for the 60-acre Letterman complex at the San Francisco Presidio site, which is due to become a national park this autumn. The conditions include a height limit on new buildings, measures to mitigate traffic, a promise not to expand beyond the federal property, ventilation systems and the proper disposal of hazardous materials — and an agreement to limit animals used in research to small rodents, such as mice and rats.

The site already houses a research centre and a hospital building. UCSF's planned medical research complex could cost between \$150 million and \$200 million for new construction and renovation, and would be used by 2,500–3,500 employees.

Research topics under consideration include population dynamics, epidemiology, microbial diseases, human genetics, structural biology, cell biology and other basic medical sciences. The university also plans to use the site for public education projects on biomedical research.

UCSF, which employs 15,000 people on four major sites, several smaller ones and in two affiliate hospitals, has had a tempestuous relationship with local residents in the recent past. Attempts to build research laboratories in a former insurance building in the prosperous Laurel Heights neighbourhood, for example, led to eight years of legal wrangling.

Now, as the university begins negotiations over potential leasing arrangements for the Presidio site, campus officials are determined not to repeat their mistakes. "We have learned from previous errors,"

says the vice chancellor, Bruce Spaulding, adding that the university has decided to involve local community groups in the planning process at a very early stage.

The university has recruited a group of 38 community advisers to help it to deal with local issues in developing plans for several potential sites for expansion. Many were selected because of their previous involvement in struggles with the university.

John Corsiglia, a member of the group and a neighbourhood activist who opposed the Laurel Heights expansion, calls the advisers "the best thing the university ever did". He says that since the committee was formed three years ago, the university had both listened and responded to those affected by its institutions.

In a plan to build a utility plant on its main campus earlier this year, for example, UCSF spent an additional \$4 million on soundproofing to meet neighbourhood concern about noise. "The university's image used to be 'we can do as we damn please' — and it was true," says Corsiglia. "That image is beginning to change."

In a bid to overcome hostility to the university's plans, UCSF officials have also held almost 20 workshops with neighbourhood associations and the general public to discuss potential locations. One suburb asked for help with local science education programmes, while an inner city neighbourhood sought assurances that local workers would get preference for construction jobs.

A primary concern behind all this has been the university's potential for unchecked growth through its use of state authority. Redmond Kernan, co-chair of the alliance, says many neighbours are concerned "because UCSF has a reputation for not being very easy to deal with". But he says the site might be a good one because the school would be kept in check by federal authority. "San Francisco needs to keep UCSF," Kernan says.

Sally Lehman

Italy backs new national physics institute

Rome. The Italian government has approved a decision to transform the Interuniversity Consortium for the Physics of Matter, a body which links 36 Italian universities, into a National Institute for the Physics of Matter.

The consortium was set up in 1987 and is based in Genoa. It is responsible for a number of broad-ranging activities funded by both the Italian government and the EC, including programmes aimed at transferring technology to industry and at boosting the technology base in the

poorer regions of Italy.

The new institute, which will take over these responsibilities, will work closely with universities in fields such as condensed matter, quantum electronics, atomic molecular and plasma physics, computational physics, and biophysics.

It will have direct contacts with the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility in Grenoble and a domestic facility in Trieste. A key goal will be to promote the participation of Italian physicists in European research programmes. □