

CONGRESSIONAL DAY BRINGS PHYSICISTS TO CAPITOL HILL

More than 130 members of The American Physical Society converged on Capitol Hill on 25 April, as part of the society's first Congressional Day, an event intended to introduce members of Congress to the physics community. In all, APS participants visited 169 Congressional offices. Sponsored jointly by APS, Representative George E. Brown Jr (Democrat of California) and Senator Al Gore (Democrat of Tennessee), the event marks "a new milestone in the history of cooperation between science and government," said one of the organizers, Michael Lubell (City College of the City University of New York).

Congressional Day was established in response to a growing concern among physicists over the erosion in recent years of Federal support for basic-physics research and development, a situation further exacerbated by a cap Congress imposed on domestic discretionary spending last fall. "It is now clear that Federal support is a 'zero-sum game,'" said Robert L. Park, director of the APS office of public affairs. "Physics is obligated to make its case as clearly and strongly as possible."

The seeds for Congressional Day were sown after APS sent two representatives to last year's Lobby Day organized by the Council on Research and Technology, a lobbying consortium that represents 167 universities, corporations and trade associations. During the May 1990 executive committee meeting of APS's division of atomic, molecular and optical physics, Lubell and Gordon Dunn (University of Colorado) suggested that the division organize a similar event.

The idea quickly mushroomed into an APS activity after division chair Anthony Starace (University of Nebraska) informed Eugen Merzbacher (University of North Carolina) of the division's plans. Merzbacher, head of the APS Physics Planning Commit-

tee and the society's president in 1990, thought it would be a good opportunity for APS members to respond to the funding crisis. He referred the matter to the planning committee, which agreed to sponsor the event and set a date to coincide with the APS spring meeting.

Park says the primary goal of Congressional Day was to reestablish lines of communication between Congress and the physics community. "This was not intended to be a hard sell to generate funding for any specific project," he said. "It was an opportunity to explain what science contributes and what the needs of science are."

Lubell said that there were far more participants than anticipated. Brown and Gore jointly sent letters to members of Congress urging them to participate, but according to the event's facilitator, Tina Kaarsberg of the APS office of public affairs, the strongest recruiting came from the subunits.

To prepare for their task, the volunteers attended a briefing session on Tuesday, 23 April, during which Gore spoke on the necessity of involving the physics community in science policy decisions. Two days later, participating physicists met with members of Congress and their staffs at an evening reception hosted by Brown.

The physicists were assigned to teams by matching members of Congress with their constituents whenever possible. In meetings with members of Congress and staff, most of the teams focused on three issues: increased funding for individual research projects as a top priority, support for the Superconducting Super Collider as a second priority, and discouragement of funding for the manned space station. Several teams also addressed the needs for improved science education and for the creation of a national energy

policy by Congress (see the article by John H. Gibbons and Peter D. Blair on page 22).

Almost all of the participants said they were received cordially and that the representatives seemed receptive to their concerns, despite occasional confusion about the nature of APS. (One team wound up talking to a 17-year-old staffer who was interested in physical fitness.) The physicists "were surprised by how knowledgeable the members of Congress and their staffs were on scientific issues," said Park.

However, few members of Congress or staffers were familiar with the recent APS statements on the SSC and the space station (see *PHYSICS TODAY*, June, page 123), and at least one expressed surprise that the space station was unpopular with scientists. Lubell points out that written statements are easily buried or misplaced. "Personal visits are much more effective in capturing the attention of Congress," he said.

Preliminary responses to a survey sent to all participants from the APS office of public affairs indicate that most volunteers felt the experience was a success and would like to see the program continued.

Both Park and Lubell believe Congressional Day may have influenced a House Appropriations subcommittee's recommendation to terminate the space station and apply some of the funds to space science and the National Science Foundation. The House reversed the decision on 6 June, largely as a result of intense lobbying efforts on behalf of the space station the night before the final vote.

Assessing the net impact of Congressional Day, Park said that its "real importance may be in initiating a process. If this does mark a transition to a more politically active role for physicists, the results could be revolutionary." ■