

Space station faces cancelation

by Marsha Freeman

On June 7, the Soviets sent two Russians and one guest cosmonaut to their Mir space station, in the first manned launch of 1988. At the same time, NASA Administrator James Fletcher and other space program officials have sounded the alarm that the cuts the Congress is considering for next year's budget could terminate the U.S.-led international space station.

For the past three years, congressional cuts in the administration's funding requests have put the station two years behind schedule. A recent report by the Congressional Budget Office has openly called for either canceling the station entirely, or stretching it out until the next century.

The congressional budget process, under the gun of a balancing act that does not allow increases in defense or space, has put all of the nation's future research and development programs at risk. Though one could just blame the Congress, it is the President's economic policies that have produced a morass in the budget process.

The budget disaster

On May 12, the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee approved an \$11.48 billion FY 1989 budget for NASA, which was the full amount requested by the administration. The \$967 million for the space station was left intact. On the same day, the HUD and Independent Agencies subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee marked up the NASA budget at \$10.7 billion, with a cut of \$65 million for the space station. With the program still above the \$900 million mark, NASA spokesmen stated that they could "live with" the House budget.

On May 16, the *Defense Daily* reported that the Senate Appropriations Committee mark-up for NASA could be a disaster. It was estimated that NASA would end up with a \$10.2 billion budget—\$500 million less than the House markup, and \$1.3 billion less than the original White House request. Three days later, the defense newsletter reported that the White House, NASA, and congressional officials all agreed the station faces cancelation unless Congress comes up with more money.

On May 19, space station chief James Odom sounded the alarm a little louder. With a \$10.2 billion budget, Odom said "there's no space station." Cuts in other science and applications programs will cripple the experiments designed to be

flown on the station. The Senate Appropriations Subcommittee is now scheduled to mark up the NASA budget on June 16.

During Fletcher's testimony at the budget hearings this spring, congressmen tried to get him to "prioritize" his programs. Following the style of former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, Fletcher refused to say "which of his children" he would prefer to kill, and has insisted that all of the programs are connected. You cannot cancel one without affecting many.

The Congressional Budget Office completed a report in May to examine "broad options" for the U.S. space program. Their conclusion is that since it is likely that "fiscal concerns" will continue through the 1990s, even the projects *NASA already has under way*, cannot be funded.

They describe a NASA "core program" consisting of the operation of the Shuttle fleet, the completion of the space station and space science projects that are already authorized, with no new initiatives. They accurately point out that both the Shuttle and space station are reusable facilities, which will operate for many years, and are the infrastructure needed to use and develop space. But this has a negative aspect, according to the CBO.

Unlike the one-shot Apollo program, funding for these projects "never goes away." As you build more infrastructure, you accrue additional operating expenses, which recur every year. Therefore, according to the CBO, just for NASA to operate the Shuttle, and then the station, means that its budget will *have to increase* over the next decade.

The CBO estimates that the NASA budget would have to rise to \$14.4 billion in 1988 dollars by 1993, and to \$16.4 billion by the year 2000. The CBO does point out that the 1965 peak Apollo funding year, was *\$22 billion*, in today's dollars. At that time, NASA's share was 4% of the federal budget. Today it is less than 1%.

The CBO suggests that the NASA budget be held *constant* at \$9 billion 1988 dollars, and that either everything be stretched out, or the space station be canceled. But stretching out large-scale projects such as the station only make them cost more. Also, at a constant budget, due to inflation alone the program would shrink at an increasing rate, making it dubious that *any* individual projects would ever be completed.

The CBO tends more toward canceling the station and all other manned space flight initiatives, and "concentrating" limited resources on unmanned planetary and space science missions. They admit that this approach will throw U.S. leadership in space out the window, but say that leadership is hard to define, anyway.

Yes, they state, there probably are economic benefits to large-scale research and development projects, like the space program. But alas, these too are hard to define, and harder to quantify, so the nation may just have to forego economic growth, in the name of balancing the budget.