

UW responds to rejection of lab project

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LEAVENWORTH — The leader of the effort to build an underground science lab near Leavenworth says the National Science Foundation should not have considered community opposition when deciding where the lab should be located.

University of Washington professor Wick Haxton said he believes that political and community pressures played a role in the Mount Cashmere site being rejected and two other sites being chosen for further study.

Haxton said his proposal for a lab in the Icicle Valley initially received high ratings by a scientific review panel that looked at eight proposals from across the U.S. and Canada. But the site was eliminated last week as a candidate.

"Something happened that led to us being downgraded," he said in an interview Monday. "I think the panel made a mistake."

Haxton said the review panel was allowed to review documentation from local critics, who circulated petitions and wrote unsolicited letters to the foundation

opposing the lab idea.

In its review of the Leavenworth site, which Haxton said he received on Friday, the panel wrote:



Wick Haxton

"The main site has the potential of having an antagonistic effect on the local population, given the environmental sensitivity of the area ..."

The panel went on to say that "the ensuing legal battles may tie up this proposed facility for a long time and cost many dollars that could be spent on science elsewhere."

Haxton said community sentiment was not supposed to be considered by the panel at this stage of the review process.

National Science Foundation spokesman Curt Suplee acknowledged on Tuesday that the review panel was asked to take a second look at all eight proposed sites without considering political or community pressures. But he said the panel did not err in factoring in that information

during its initial review.

Haxton said that on its geologic merits, the review panel gave the Mount Cashmere site an "excellent" rating — the highest rating available. The site received the next highest rating of "very good" on its scientific merits.

He said he disagreed with some of the panel's findings, particularly related to costs. While the construction costs at the Mount Cashmere site were higher than other proposed locations, it's operating costs were projected to be considerably less because of its horizontal access and lower regional power costs.

"It appears to us that they made a major error" in calculating the costs, Haxton said.

He believes the two sites chosen for further study of building an underground lab — Homestake Mine in South Dakota and Henderson Mine in Colorado — were chosen because of their strong political and community support, and not on their geologic or scientific attributes.

"But it's after the fact, so whatever impact that had on our proposal is not something we can correct at this point," he said.

DUSEL report card

National Science Foundation review panels comments on underground lab proposal at Mount Cashmere near Leavenworth:

1. Although the applicant sought \$500,000 in NSF research funding, the next phase of studies are expected to cost \$908,000, and the application did not say where the rest of the funding would come from.
2. The undeveloped site has the "disadvantage" of carrying higher costs building and operating the mine and of restoring the land afterward
3. Public opposition could result in lengthy and costly legal battles
4. Horizontal access to lab, as opposed to the vertical access at other proposed sites, is "very attractive"
5. Strong history of tunneling in the Cascades and adequate geologic information on which to base construction costs and timelines
6. Proposal is "well thought out and convincing"
7. Researchers and advisers on the proposal are "exemplary"



Source: National Science Foundation

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