

Frederick officials seek info on Detrick gene work

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By ROLLIE ATKINSON
Staff Writer

The Frederick County Commissioners have requested National Institutes of Health (NIH) officials to come before them and Frederick City officials to explain NIH plans to locate recombinant DNA genetic research at Ft. Detrick.

The meeting is scheduled to take place at 2 p.m. Thursday, March 17, at Winchester Hall. The briefing between NIH officials and local government representatives may lead to a larger scale public meeting, according to County Commissioner Paul L. Crum Jr. One commissioner reportedly is already calling for such a meeting.

Last week, NIH plans to implement a \$3 million recombinant DNA project to the former germ warfare center next to the NIH cancer research center were revealed. Remodeling of a compound of Ft. Detrick buildings to house the genetic work is under way with NIH project coordinator Dr. John Nutter explaining preliminary "risk assessment" experiments should begin here within the month.

Dr. Nutter confirmed Sunday night he has accepted the county officials' invitation to explain the recombinant DNA project as well as answer any questions from the invited officials.

Last week, Dr. Nutter said he and other NIH officials would be "most willing" to meet with the public if local officials sponsor such a hearing.

"I feel if we can properly answer all the local questions and be allowed to adequately explain the program," said Dr. Nutter, "there won't be any opposition to what we are trying to do at Ft. Detrick."

Another meeting between NIH officials, Frederick and Montgomery County and Maryland State health officials, Congressional representatives and other invited persons, including members of the press, will be held at NIH in Bethesda on March 28. Exact time and location have not yet been determined.

Local citizens may wish to increase their knowledge on recombinant DNA by watching the PBS television special at 8 p.m. Wednesday on WETA channel 26 entitled, "The Gene Engineers."

Another recombinant DNA project is continuing on the NIH Bethesda campus and two years of preparations are envi-

sioned by Dr. Nutter before the full NIH genetic research laboratory is in operation at Ft. Detrick.

Initial announcement of the NIH plans for use of the local federal lab research facility came before a Congressional committee almost two weeks ago and local officials last week appeared surprised by NIH plans to locate the controversial recombinant DNA work here.

As one County Commissioner said at the time, "I'm not so worried about the safety of Ft. Detrick as I am about what they intend to use the research for."

Similarly, many of the Frederick community, have taken to asking, "Just what is recombinant DNA?"

Some scientists have claimed the discovery of the capability to recombine DNA is as important to science as the discovery of the microscope, while others, in serious tones, suggest it infringes on the domain of the Creator.

DNA, or deoxyribonucleic acid, is the substance genes are made of and where all living organisms' hereditary information is stored. By combining or ex-

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changing the DNA between two cells which usually do not interchange DNA, scientists who conduct recombinant DNA experiments can give new properties or behaviors to a life form or create a totally new life form altogether.

As most scientists agree, recombinant DNA research is the most advanced and difficult to understand of modern science work. Scientists also agree, while strongly disagreeing on other points, that recombinant DNA holds revolutionary possibilities for life on earth.

Recombinant DNA, according to the NIH project description to be conducted at Ft. Detrick, "is molecule(s) consisting of different segments of DNA where they are joined together in a cell-free system and have the capacity to affect and replicate in a host cell."

What that means is, scientists could introduce DNA from a cancer-fighting antibody into a cancer-inflicted host cell and develop a cure for cancer. Or, by introducing the DNA responsible for nitrogen fixing from a legume into a standard strain of wheat, scientists might develop a wheat hybrid capable of fixing its own nitrogen, or, in effect, manufacturing its own fertilizer.

These are some of the goals scientists have in mind for the recombinant DNA technology but no such specific programs have yet been set forth for Ft. Detrick or anywhere else.

"We are at the stage of developing the technology, or lab tool to later be applied to appropriate targets," explained Dr. Nutter.

A question of more immediate local

importance, many people also are asking, "How safe is the Ft. Detrick facility and the recombinant DNA experiments?"

"I feel totally positive about the containment capabilities of the Ft. Detrick facility," offered Dr. Nutter. He said an escape by a mutant germ from the local research lab would only be given a 100 million-to-one chance of escape and survival.

Last year, NIH adopted guidelines to oversee the safety factor in all recombinant DNA experiments. This followed a year's self-imposed moratorium by national genetic scientists — an extraordinary move by scientist which, in part, acknowledged the magnitude of unknown possibilities inherent in recombinant DNA lab work.

Ft. Detrick's maximum-containment lab facilities, which successfully protected the Frederick community from 29 years of germ warfare research, meet the strictest physical guidelines of the NIH rules. As a doublecheck, NIH scientists at Ft. Detrick also will incorporate what are known as "biological containments," which means organisms which only stand a 1-in-a-100 million chance of survival, or less, upon escaping from the lab will be used.

Federal legislation has been proposed earlier this month in the U.S. Senate to write into law the NIH guidelines on recombinant DNA.

SERVICE FOR DEAD

A requiem is a religious service for the dead, so named from the first word in the Roman Catholic Latin ritual.