

Look before we leap

Frederick area residents should be concerned about the surprise announcement last week that a new research effort into an unknown field — genetic manipulation — is scheduled to be carried out at the laboratory facilities at Fort Detrick.

But let us all take a good close look before we either applaud the decision or condemn it.

The government agency — National Institutes of Health (NIH) — in charge of the project would quite naturally expect a genuine local concern about any new research project "into the unknown" earmarked for Frederick. However, the manner in which this \$3 million project was revealed to the community — "we were the last to learn about it," one official said — has raised eyebrows and questions.

Because the "unknown" has a tendency to generate fear in those who do not understand it, or have not received a full and reasonable explanation of it, you might say the "local natives are restless."

What is this "gene manipulation" research that is to be conducted in our community?

Why was the announcement so poorly handled that local residents have not had the opportunity to be fully informed before finding out second hand that the project was being planned for Fort Detrick?

Failure to lay before the people the full story — the tight restrictions Congress has put on this research, the built-in fail-safe precautions, a reminder that the Detrick labs are regarded as perhaps the best in the world for this kind of research, and much more that could have abated fear and apprehension — has already put the project in a dark light.

This Thursday, Frederick County's officialdom will sit

down with the NIH project director, Dr. John Nutter, in the meeting room of Winchester Hall, for a comprehensive briefing on the project.

Then on Monday, March 28, there will be another meeting with local officials and congressional representatives at NIH in Bethesda.

NIH is leaving to the local officials the decision on whether there should be a public hearing or informational meeting with NIH officials and concerned citizens. If local officials ask for it, NIH has indicated it will capitulate.

Thursday, the County Commissioners will have their briefing. Hopefully they will feel the necessity of asking for a meeting at which the local citizenry can obtain answers to any question on the proposed "gene manipulation" research project.

The debate of genetic research of the kind proposed for Detrick has been going on the past three years, forcing Congress to insist on tighter and tighter restrictions. Despite this, some scientists themselves are clamoring for even greater security measures.

The community, concerned about the project and the intense preliminary research expected to start in April into the potential hazards of genetic

manipulation experiments, suffered a "double shock" last week with confirmation that Frederick was one of several communities used as "guinea pigs" for germ warfare tests between 1950 and 1969.

Now, upon learning that the proposed NIH genetic manipulation research center may be put into operation here as early as 1979, there is growing concern about the entire program.

The concern is genuine and cannot be faulted. The people have a right to know what is going on, what all this "gene manipulation" research fear means, what the risks will be to the community, if any, and what guarantees there will be that no further "secret" testing will be carried out on an unsuspecting community.