



Photo courtesy of Public Information

The proposed science building, pictured here in an architect's sketch, is in the pre-planning phase, and may not be constructed for several years due to state budget cuts and the completion of other projects, according to College officials.

## Old equipment, overcrowding leaves Combs Hall outdated, prompts plans for new science building

By Michael Fuhrman  
*Bullet Associate Editor*

Although Mary Washington College was ranked among the nation's 300 best buys among the nation's colleges and universities in a recent *Barron's* magazine report, the report also concluded that "the [college's] sciences tend to be weaker because of inadequate facilities and equipment."

This, however, does not come as a surprise to many who frequent Combs Hall, which houses the college's biology, chemistry and geology, and physics departments. A former chemistry major who is now studying English at the college said, "I don't know why anyone would major in science here. Combs is a joke."

The administration apparently isn't laughing, however, and has committed significant time and money to the planning of a new, multi-million dollar science facility to be constructed in the vicinity of the new library. The college's Board of Visitors approved

funding for a \$50,000 preplanning study of the project at a general meeting on Sept. 29.

"Science, in general, of 1990 is not the same as science of the 1950s," explained Richard Miller, the college's vice president for Business and Finance.

Many students pursuing degrees in sciences are equally unimpressed with the present facilities. They cite overcrowding in the laboratories and archaic equipment as the chief causes of their discontent.

"Because the number of science majors is increasing, the labs are becoming overcrowded," asserted senior Michele Silver. "To solve the overcrowding, they have opened more sections which puts a strain on the professors and the facility."

Silver, a fifth year student who is completing her degree requirements for a double major in physics and chemistry this year, is very familiar with the problems facing both faculty and students who work and study in

Combs. "There is only one general physics laboratory," she said. "And there are only two classrooms each for chemistry and physics."

Other students are concerned about overcrowding problems as well. "My organic chemistry class has about 50 students in it," added junior biology major Jen Keller.

Sophomore Allison Gillenwater, who plans on majoring in biology, has taken several science courses in Combs. "Some of the equipment is really old," said Gillenwater. "I think the new building should have been built ten years ago."

Keller agrees. "I'm impressed with most of the equipment," she said. "But some of it seems like it has been here since the school opened."

Faculty members agree with students to some extent. "The equipment is not the problem," stated Stephen Fuller, professor of biological sciences at the college. "Space is."

Fuller, who has been at the college for 19 years, is chairman of an eight-member

faculty committee which is working with the architects to design the layout of the new building, based on the needs of the various science departments. The committee is composed of three biology professors, including Fuller, two chemistry professors, one geology professor, and two physics professors.

"The building will be planned programmatically based on the needs of the faculty and the science students," asserted Miller. He said that faculty members would have a significant say in the building's layout and design.

According to Fuller, Combs Hall has been overcrowded since its completion in the late 1950s. "There were more departments than originally planned from day one," he said.

"Combs was designed for science in the fifties," echoed Dr. Robert McConnell. "Today it's not adequate." "As I understand it, scheduling classes is very difficult because of the press

see SCIENCE, page 2

# SCIENCE

from page 1

for space [in Combs]," said McConnell, an associate professor of geology at the college. "There is competition for space between the science disciplines, all of which need more lecture space."

McConnell praised the proposed facility, saying that it would enhance the college's course offerings and help support the college's increasing enrollment. "And there will be more room for student research," said McConnell, adding that the college has been working to expand this area of study in recent years.

As for the claims that much of the building's equipment is out-dated, Fuller says that this is simply not the case. The biology department alone has purchased approximately \$370,000 in state-of-the-art equipment in the last two years, he said, much of which would be transferred to the new facility.

According to Vice President Miller, the proposed building will be approximately 75,000 to 85,000 square feet in size and could cost between \$7.5 and \$8.5 million. Miller warned, however, that both the size and cost estimates are "a rough guess."

He also stressed that there is no timetable for the building's completion, or even the beginning of construction. "I wouldn't even hazard a guess on the starting date," admitted Miller. "It could be tomorrow or ten years from now."

The main obstacle hindering the project is funding. The money would either come from the state's lottery revenues, which are no longer being used to finance new capital building projects, or from the state's general fund. Because of the state's budget shortfall, lottery profits are now deposited in the general fund.

Unlike North Hall, the college's newest residence hall which was completed prior to the fall term, the science building cannot be funded by a revenue bond, explained Miller. "A science

building does not generate revenue like a dorm," he said, adding that interest on the bond for North Hall is financed with money collected from student room and board charges.

Initially, the Richmond-based architecture firm Rawlings & Wilson was hired to study the prospect of expanding and renovating Combs Hall. "The original preplanning study was designed for bringing Combs into the 1990s," said Miller. "The architects determined, however, that it would be more cost efficient to build a new science building," he added.

The original plans for renovating Combs were scrapped because the project was not cost effective. However, Miller added that even had this not been the case, it still would have been difficult to expand the current science facility because of its proximity to College Avenue and because of the presence of heating tunnels and utility lines in the area.

The preliminary study recently approved by the board will be completed in the spring, said Miller, at which time more accurate estimates on the structure's size and cost will be available. If the Board of Visitors approves the plans set forth in the preplanning study, then the college will submit the same proposal to the state, according to Miller.

If the state approves the preplanning proposal, then it could allocate money for a more in-depth planning study, in which the building's specifications and working drawings would be drafted. Miller said that this study, which will cost an estimated \$400,000 and takes as long as a year to complete, could be initiated as soon as this spring.

Before construction could actually begin, the final plans would have to be approved by both the Board of Visitors and the state.

Following the completion of the proposed science building, Combs would

be converted into a residence hall. "It makes sense for Combs to be a dormitory," explained Miller, noting its large rooms and wide hallways. "It doesn't look like a science building."

It is highly likely that neither project would be undertaken until the fine arts center undergoes nearly \$3.8 million of renovations, said Miller. The fine arts renovation project was put on hold when Governor L. Douglas Wilder suspended lottery-financed capital projects this summer, as a means of controlling the state's billion dollar budget crisis.

"Obviously no one is thinking the building will be built in the next year or two," said chairman Fuller, who added that planning early is necessary so that the final plans will be complete when the economy turns around.

FOR GOOD FOOD  
GREAT A

WEST

MWC

Fou

purchase o

Rt. 3

Westwood Center

373-4533