

A Conference that Almost Happened

An unusual series of meetings in 1984 and 1985 brought together leaders of local defense-related laboratories and industries with leaders of the local peace community. It is unusual for these two groups to speak directly to each other—even more unusual for them to collaborate. But in this case we did. We came close to jointly sponsoring a public forum about “Defense-Related Funding for Research and Development in Ann Arbor: Its Nature, Scope, and Effects.”

The impetus for this unusual collaboration had been a proposed amendment to the City Charter which would have created a “Nuclear-Free Zone” in and around Ann Arbor. “Design, research, development, testing, or production of nuclear weapons; delivery systems... communication systems for such weapons” would have been prohibited. The NFZ amendment was first proposed in the fall of 1983. Petitions were circulated, sides drawn, and the campaign was hard-fought up to the defeat of the amendment in the election of November, 1984.

I surprised and offended some members of the peace community by opposing the NFZ. I wrote my reasons which were published in the newsletter of the Interfaith Council for Peace in October of 1984 (included in this packet). Perhaps because of my efforts, ICP did not take a position on the NFZ proposal, although many of its members may have voted for it.

University researchers and leaders of local defense-related industries had been alarmed by the NFZ proposal and had fought hard to defeat it. The voters rejected it. But there was a residue of pain on both sides. My files do not reveal how or when the idea was born to reach across this gap and try to understand each other better. Someone, somehow, called a meeting.

On November 9, twenty-two people came at noon to the First Methodist Church for a “Planning Meeting for a Conference on Economic Conversion.” They included Alan Price, the University’s Vice President for Research, Executive Vice President Marvin Holter of the Environmental Research Institute of Michigan (ERIM), William Pollard of KMS Fusion (another local laboratory with contracts from the Department of Defense), staff members from our state representative and state senator, former mayor Bob Harris, Professor Nick Steneck who directed the Collegiate Institute for Values and Science, two physics professors—Marc Ross and Gordon Kane—who had opposed the NFZ although they had also participated in meetings to lobby our Congressman against nuclear weapons. A good number of peace activists also attended. The names of all 22 attendees are recorded in their own handwriting in this packet.

After we introduced ourselves, my notes show a cautious exchange of thoughts about the subject of the meeting. People weren’t sure how far to trust each other. But several were impressed by the potential for an unusual dialogue. Bob Harris, law professor, former Democratic mayor and a member of the Coalition for Arms Control, remarked that we had an “unusual group here. Let’s not blow it... Can we mend some fences, succeed as a group?” Richard Cleaver of the Friends said, “We in peace activities are not expert in business, economics... Sharing is rare, and this is an opportunity.”

Before the meeting adjourned, all present were requested to submit within 2 weeks what they thought should be the objectives of a conference, as well as proposals for its structure and the questions it should address. The next meeting was set for December 1st, a Saturday, at 9:30 AM.

Several people responded with ideas and/or reservations. After the December meeting, I and Marc Ross and Gordon Kane (the physicists) prepared the first and second draft for an Economic Conversion Conference "of local scope." Bob Harris and Nick Steneck prepared the draft of a conference of national scope to be held later.

Larry Macklem presided at meetings, and Kim Groome mailed communications to all attendees. Both were leaders of the Interfaith Council.

After the January 5th meeting, the conference was re-named "Defense-Related Funding for R&D in Ann Arbor: Its History, Potential, Effects, and Alternatives." Slightly later it was shortened after the colon to "Its Nature, Scope, and Effects." This reflected the counsel of Alan Price and others who pointed out that directors of laboratories and industries were offended by the assumption that "conversion" of their work was desirable or necessary.

By late January we were inviting speakers for a "forum" (no longer a conference) to be held on April 13. We sent letters to Alex Glass, president of KMS Fusion, William Brown, president of ERIM, James Duderstadt, Dean of the College of Engineering, and Rodney Benson, president of the Chamber of Commerce. We asked the Chamber to be a sponsor, along with the Ann Arbor News, the Collegiate Institute for Values and Science, the Ann Arbor Citizens' Council, the League of Women Voters, the Michigan Student Assembly, Physicians for Social Responsibility, and the Michigan Alliance for Disarmament. Minutes of the ICP Disarmament Working Group reported that "some sponsors have confirmed... speakers have been invited."

The last-named group promptly turned us down. They had initiated the NFZ ballot proposal and noted that the proposed forum was "weighted" with people who had campaigned against it, "who, unlike us, are wealthy and influential enough to command or purchase platforms for their views." Also, Alliance leaders Janis Michael and Justin Schwartz objected to a lack of symmetry in the treatment of the two "sides" in the plan of the forum. They complained that the panel from industry were each given 20 minutes to inform the audience about defense-related R&D that was happening in Ann Arbor, whereas the panel representing arms-control and peace groups were each given 10 minutes for a statement plus 30 minutes (shared) to question members of the industry panel.

The same objection was raised by Marvin Holter of ERIM. In a letter dated February 15 he criticized the asymmetries in the design of the conference, complaining that "Panel 1 is required to describe their business activities" and Panel 2 will then question Panel 1 on those activities. Not symmetrical. He also disliked the questions to be asked of speakers. He questioned the whole purpose and value of a conference from the point of view of his institution. He sent copies of his letter to Benson, Price, Duderstadt, Glass, Pollard.

On March 6 Kim Groome mailed to everyone a revised plan correcting the problems pointed out by MAD and ERIM. Each panelist would have 15 minutes. All would be

asked to address the same questions, such as "What are you doing, and why is it important?" The asymmetries of the earlier plan had been intended to furnish the community with information about DoD contracts in Ann Arbor, which were largely unknown even after the year-long NFZ campaign. The equal-time, same-question format of the revised plan diminished its educational potential, in the opinion of some. The new questions tilted more toward the political: for instance, "What are the advantages/disadvantages of involuntary conversion enforced by the law?"

My files contain no responses after that date from any of the invited sponsors or speakers. The League of Women Voters announced the forum to its members in their April League Bulletin, but this was premature. The League then had to send a postcard informing members that the forum had been cancelled because "KMS Fusion, ERIM, and U-M College of Engineering have decided not to participate." As a LWV member, I received one of those postcards. I have combed through my files from the ICP and their newsletters leading to April, 1985 to see if they, like the League, had announced the forum, but they had not.

A note to me from Alan Price, dated 4/8/85 said,

Dear Mary—

Sorry to get Kim's note—I had talked to all the DoD researchers, but I fear they still saw it more "confrontational" than really "educational", especially with the MAD revisions. But at least we talked. Thank you for your effort.

Alan

Whether the researchers would have agreed to speak under the earlier proposed format is an interesting question. Marvin Holter's letter suggests not.

Alex Glass, CEO of KMS Fusion, accepted an invitation to meet with the Disarmament Working Group of the ICP on May 14, 1985. This packet contains the questions we hoped to ask him as well as my note to ICP members suggesting that we make this a "win-win" event, not a confrontation. Also included are my notes taken at the meeting with Dr. Glass.

Dr. Glass invited ICP members to tour his plant in January, 1986. A second tour was offered (for those who missed the first) on April 21, 1986. This packet contains the 1984 Annual Report of KMS Fusion, which I received on the January 1986 tour.

Mary Hathaway

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