Board hires CAMD director

Martin says cuts may force facility to close

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LSU has quietly hired a new director for its Center for Advanced Microstructures and Devices at the same time the LSU chancellor is saying CAMD may need to be shut down because of state budget cuts.

As part of its overall personnel changes and without discussion, the LSU Board of Supervisors on Thursday approved hiring John Sutherland, the East Carolina University physics department chairman, who has a joint appointment at Brookhaven National Laboratory in New York.

Sutherland’s new annual salary at LSU will be $210,000.

If LSU does cut off its funding to CAMD, Chancellor Michael Martin said Friday, the hope is that Sutherland can attract enough federal grant funding to keep CAMD running self-sufficiently on Jefferson Highway so it can remain open.

“When your football team is down, you go and hire the very best football coach you can find,” Martin said.

Even if CAMD cannot survive in a worst-case scenario, Martin said, “We will have hired a very, very fine physics professor.”

The J. Bennett Johnston Sr. CAMD facility features the only giant synchrotron light source of its kind in the South.

The synchrotron works by generating electrons that giant magnets swing in a circle at the speed of light to create light beams such as X-rays. Those are used in everything from nanofabrication of targeted drug delivery for cancer to the creation of powerful computer chips.

Although still heavily used, LSU officials have bemoaned that CAMD never reached its potential as a research park or a business recruiting tool.

LSU has searched nearly three years for a new CAMD director. A top choice was made late in 2007, but the job was turned down, and the search had to start over again.
Brooks Keel, LSU vice chancellor for research and economic development, called the hire a “gamble.” Keel said he hopes the hire is not “misunderstood” by the Legislature when budget cuts for colleges are pending.

“These are the things a flagship university has to do,” Keel said, calling the decision an “agonizing process” and not at all “flippant.”

When reached Friday, Sutherland said he is excited about the job but concerned about the “extremely critical time for LSU and also the CAMD facility.”

LSU is facing close to $34 million in pending budget cuts to be determined by the Legislature. Those cuts would be on top of about $10 million already sliced in January. Martin has said LSU must protect its “academic core,” which puts research facilities like CAMD at risk to absorb the cuts.

“I’m not going to reconsider (the job) based on what I don’t know is going to happen in the next month or two,” Sutherland said of budget cuts, noting that he has been communicating with LSU for months.

“Right now everyone is concerned about keeping the facility open,” he said.

At the same time, there is the problem of significantly setting CAMD back if it remains open but loses much of its staffing, he said.

Sutherland said he hopes to increase regional users at CAMD while also receiving external dollars to upgrade the synchrotron.

Keel said he is confident Sutherland will remake CAMD into a “more efficient model.”

“He (Sutherland) is either the most crazy son of a gun to walk the face of the Earth,” Keel said, “or he’s the most dedicated son of a gun.”