

Group wants to reopen star attraction

Freeholders asked to help save planetarium

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TOMS RIVER BUREAU

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TOMS RIVER — A new fund-raising group is trying to save the Robert J. Novins Planetarium at Ocean County College, and on Wednesday members asked county freeholders to help reopen the star-show auditorium.

"The residents of Ocean County want their planetarium to stay open," said Richard Gamba, president of the new Save the Planetarium Fund. "To let this gem fade away would be a disgrace."

About a month ago, OCC officials said a promised \$2.5 million from an anonymous donor would not come through, and revelations soon followed that self-styled philanthropist Edward Devine of Berkeley had made phony promises to area charities as well.

"That really hurt us," Gamba said. "Because of him, we're a year behind in fundraising."

College officials have said they are continuing to seek public and private grant funding to restore the planetarium, which closed last year after administrators decided it was no longer cost-effective to keep repairing the projector console and other outdated equipment.

Planetarium supporters asked the Ocean County freeholders to help make a commitment for reopening the facility. Some expedient repairs might have kept the planetarium running while the fund-raising search continues, they said.

"We need to get the Board of Trustees to say . . . do they want this planetarium or not?" said Richard Gamba, who is vice president of the Astronomical Society of Toms River (ASTRA), which makes up the core of the new group.

"If they say they don't want a planetarium, then, well, I guess we'll have a fight on our hands," he said. "Because people like the planetarium."

Planetarium supporters often speak of the star shows as an important part of growing up in Ocean County during the past 30 years; field trips to the Novins auditorium were an introduction to astronomy for thousands of elementary school children.

"It's the only one in central New Jersey. Why would you let that be lost?" Gamba asked.

With tens of millions of dollars in construction planned for the OCC campus in the coming years, "it is very difficult to believe" that the planetarium can't be included in capital improvement plans, Gamba told the freeholders.

The freeholders didn't comment after Gamba's presentation. But after the meeting, Freeholder Director John P. Kelly spoke to Gamba, and they agreed to meet again to discuss the fund-raising effort.

One planetarium supporter, Jay Randolph Walton of Howell, said he was disturbed by college officials' apparent desire to have the facility "self supporting" with admission fees and revenue covering its operating costs. "You don't ask that of other educational facilities, libraries or . . .

computer labs," he said.

"They expect the planetarium to be a profit center, but they don't give it the tools to be profitable," Gamba said. The gift shop did not have online credit card processing capability, for example, and the planetarium's last marketing budget was just \$1,200, he said.

The planetarium fund was organized hurriedly last week. To raise money, volunteers have started printing \$15 T-shirts that bear an image of the Novins projector. The group is seeking members to help with its fundraising, Gamba said. Its first organized event will be held in conjunction with ASTRA's annual Astronomy Day at the college April 21, with daytime events from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. in the college center solar lounge, and an evening of star-gazing on the campus grounds.

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