

Saving planetarium to cost \$1.5 million

OCC will modernize facility

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BY KIRK MOORE
TOMS RIVER BUREAU

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TOMS RIVER — After weeks of mounting concern over the future of the Robert J. Novins Planetarium, a new \$1.5 million fundraising campaign announced Monday by the Ocean County College board of trustees will aim to reopen the star show auditorium with modern digital technology and building renovations.

"Our goal is to make sure we have state-of-the-art equipment, and make sure we have the core of the facility — the theater — restored and operational," said James McGinty, the college vice president for instructional technology.

About two-thirds of the estimated price tag will go into renovating the planetarium proper, with the remainder to refurbish and update the 35-year-old building to modern construction codes, McGinty said.

It's a more modest, downsized plan from the \$2.5 million project that college officials envisioned being financed with the promise of a financial gift from Edward Devine, a Berkeley man who posed as a trucking company CEO and offered to pay for rebuilding and operating the Novins facility.

In January, college officials learned that offer was bogus — Devine operates only a single tractor-trailer with a couple of boxes, not the massive East Coast transport company he described to the college and local charities.

Since then, OCC officials have been regrouping, while planetarium director Gloria Villalobos looks for grant opportunities and whittled-down renovation options so they can at least get the planetarium operating with new equipment, McGinty said.

The theater shut down in early September 2006, after two years during which its aging equipment had become increasingly balky and difficult to keep in repair, Villalobos said.

"We only lost three shows due to equipment failure," Villalobos recalled. But in the last days every show was a trial to presenters. At times they had to duck into the theater's audio equipment to manually spin the old reel-to-reel tape player that provided soundtracks, she said.

Off to a good start

College trustee Stephen R. Leone said he will head up the fundraising committee to seek donations from the Ocean County community and "dedicate ourselves to the reopening."

Already the Ocean County College Foundation has pledged the proceeds from its annual 2007 summer gala toward the planetarium project, Leone said, and in recent years that event has brought in around \$250,000.

"So we have a good start in terms of where we want to go," he said. "The planetarium, to me, is no different from the fine arts theater" in the services it provides to both the college and the surrounding community, Leone added.

It was that 35-year history of introducing generations of schoolchildren to astronomy that's galvanized planetarium supporters inside and outside the college.

"I did a little polling in my classes, asking who had been to the planetarium, and I'd say 90 percent of the hands went up," said Jim Luyster, an environmental sciences teacher at Toms River High School South whose students are nearing their goal of raising \$500 toward the facility.

Local astronomer Richard Gamba, an organizer of the community-based Save The Planetarium Fund, said that group is holding its first membership meeting at 7 tonight at the Knights of Columbus Hall at Tennyson and Whittier avenues, just south off Route 37 in Toms River.

Gamba thanked the trustees for starting their own fund drive. "We are committed to helping you meet the goal of making the Novins planetarium a world-class facility," he told them.

PLANETARIUM FUNDRAISING

Ocean County College officials figure it will take around \$1.5 million to renovate and reopen the Robert J. Novins Planetarium. The major expenses will include:
A star projector that uses modern digital technology. The last time they priced a machine, the estimated cost was around \$500,000.

New computer and audio equipment.

Refinishing the dome used to project star shows.

Bringing the 35-year-old planetarium building up to modern building code standards.

\$500,000 projector

It will take money and time. Villalobos said the last time she priced the cost of a modern star projector — the centerpiece of any planetarium — it was around \$500,000 with a nine- to 10-month lead time. "One of the reasons they cost so much is they don't have them on the shelf," she said.


Along with planning renovations, Villalobos and others are looking for ways to expand the planetarium's scheduling and outreach to elementary schools, so it will be able to accommodate both more school groups of young children and OCC students taking courses.

Bringing in more audiences and using the planetarium to provide student-paid credit hours will provide additional revenue toward balancing the facility's operating costs, said Sara Winchester, the college vice president for finance.

"The expense side will go down because it will take less manpower to run state-of-the-art equipment," she added.

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To further alleviate the burden maybe proceeds from the Toms River Fest can go to saving the planetarium.

Posted by: tommsu on Tue Mar 27, 2007 2:55 pm

I echo wjgenci's comment. It would have been a travesty had the planetarium been lost for good.

I would recommend that the fundraisers investigate the Kresge foundation (www.kresge.org), which provides challenge grants for nonprofits.

Posted by: acitizen on Tue Mar 27, 2007 1:44 pm

Community coming together for the betterment of all, especially our children. This is how it should be! I applaud all involved and hope for this fundraising effort to be immediately successful.

Posted by: wjgenci on Tue Mar 27, 2007 11:09 am

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