

Shooting for the stars

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Supporters of the Robert J. Novins Planetarium on the Ocean County College campus in Toms River now know what it will take to reopen the facility: \$1.5 million. That will pay for digital technology and renovations to the building that for 35 years has housed the first introduction to astronomy for generations of schoolchildren.

A fundraising campaign for the planetarium was announced Monday by the college's Board of Trustees. Now that the scope of the project has been defined, donors from the public and private sectors should combine to make it a reality.

The price tag represents a scaled-down version of plans envisioned last year when a Berkeley man posing as a trucking company executive promised a \$2.5 million gift to the college to upgrade the planetarium. But the "benefactor's" financial resources and largess proved bogus, leaving college officials scurrying to develop alternative plans.

The largest chunk of the new total — \$500,000 — is the estimated cost of a modern star projector. The rest will go toward new computer and audio equipment, refurbishing the dome used to project star shows and upgrading the building to meet modern codes.

The theater has been shuttered since September, after struggling for two years with balky equipment that was increasingly difficult to repair. The closing brought an end to a tradition of school groups from Ocean and Monmouth counties getting their first good look at the planets and stars.

That lost educational experience spurred planetarium backers to save the building. The Ocean County College Foundation has pledged the proceeds of its 2007 summer gala. In the past, that has come to about \$250,000. Local astronomer Richard Gamba has helped organize the Save the Planetarium Fund, which he said will help the college "meet the goal of making the Novins Planetarium a world-class facility." With enthusiastic backing like that, the next generation of schoolchildren should soon be able to see the stars again.

STORYCHAT 

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