

Planetarium backers regroup after deceit

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TOMS RIVER — Stung by one man's deception and months of delay, supporters of the Robert J. Novins Planetarium are striving to build a citizens' group to ensure that the 32-year-old star theater reopens at Ocean County College.

"Fooled me once, but not again," Richard J. Gamba, president of the Save the Planetarium Fund, said as he recounted for volunteers how he and college officials were deceived by phony philanthropist Edward Devine and his offer of \$2.5 million.

Weeks of uncertainty followed revelations that Devine had lied about his supposed riches, with rumors on the OCC campus that if new donors were not found soon, the planetarium would close permanently, Gamba said. Last week the college Board of Trustees announced a plan to raise \$1.5 million from grants and donations to renovate and reopen the facility and follow that up with a new marketing effort to restore its old reputation as a must-see field trip destination for New Jersey schoolchildren.

On Friday, a committee of trustees met at the planetarium to organize their new drive, reviewing the facility's needs and planning to start fundraising and "raising public awareness of the planetarium," said trustee Stephan R. Leone, who is leading the group.

"Everything's positive.

We're committed to it," Leone said. The Ocean County College Foundation's annual fundraising gala on Sept. 8 will be themed around raising money for the planetarium, Leone said. In recent years, the event has typically raised about \$250,000, according to college officials.

Meanwhile, Gamba said the Save the Planetarium Fund will continue on its track of raising the public visibility of the Novins planetarium, named for a founding college trustee and advocate for building the original star theater.

The group is raising money, too. It will take about eight months for the fund to have its tax-exempt status certified by the Internal Revenue Service, and "the good news is almost everyone gets it," Gamba told volunteers. So donors would be able to retroactively claim their gifts as tax deductions, although Gamba anticipates the group won't see really big donations until the tax status is affirmed.

One danger that fund organizer Sarah Waters foresees is that people may think "the problem is already solved" with the trustees' announcement of their own fundraising drive. Planetarium supporters already have been burned and are determined to see this through to the end, she and Gamba said.

The planetarium already was in danger of closing in mid-2006 when college officials were approached by Edward Devine, who presented himself as CEO of a major East Coast trucking firm. With Devine's offer of \$2.5 million, college officials decided to stop putting money into expensive, repeated repairs of planetarium equipment, and the auditorium held its last show in early September.

"He was very good. I met him personally, and he was very smooth," Gamba said ruefully of Devine. "I can understand how everyone was taken in."

When Devine was revealed as a fraud over the winter, Gamba said supporters realized they had lost crucial months when they could have been fundraising. Within a few weeks, they organized the

fund with help from Michael York, a Toms River lawyer whose firm represented Devine and was left with unpaid bills.

Publicity about the bizarre Devine case has had one good effect of bringing in some help for fundraisers. At Toms River High School South, students collected hundreds of dollars this month in a show of support for the planetarium.

"It all started out with my environmental science classes, juniors and seniors at Toms River South," said teacher Jim Luyster, whose homeroom and science classes have been raising money. "We were talking about places to go for a field trip. The planetarium was mentioned, and when we looked into that, we found out it was closed."

Luyster said the students came up with the idea of raising money as a gesture of support for a place many fondly remembered from their visits as elementary school students.

When asked how many of them had been to the planetarium as children, almost everyone's hand went up, Luyster recalled. "Five hundred dollars was our goal, but it was more of a statement that we wanted to keep it open," he said.

About 20 students took the lead, setting up a system for collecting donations and promoting the fund drive over the school's morning public-address announcements — complete with theme music from the "Star Wars" films.

"The school is really into community service," Luyster noted. In less than a week, students contributed \$360, and by last week, they expected to more than fulfill their goal, he said.

"That's great," Leone said of the students' effort. "That's wonderful. We encourage them to do that. The more people in the community get involved, the better it will be."

Supporters can also talk to their local school districts about reviving the custom of using the planetarium for elementary school science education, Leone said: "We want to see the community use this facility."

The theater's slow decline was due largely to obsolete technology, but once refurbished, "it will be state of the art and people will get excited about it," he said.

ON THE WEB: Visit our Web site, www.app.com, and click on this story for links to the Save the Planetarium Fund, Robert J. Novins Planetarium and Astronomical Society of the Toms River Area.

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