

Astronomy Day raises \$6,500 for OCC planetarium

COLLEGE STARTS FUNDRAISER

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TOMS RIVER BUREAU

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TOMS RIVER — Hundreds of people who turned out for the annual Astronomy Day at Ocean County College also helped raise some \$3,500 over the weekend to kick off a fund drive to re-open the Robert J. Novins Planetarium on campus, according to organizers.

"There had to be five or 600 people during the daytime activities, and two or 300 for the evening star viewing," said Richard Gamba, president of the Save the Planetarium Fund.

Out of the donations and pledges made Saturday at Astronomy Day, \$3,000 will be matched by a major donor, effectively doubling the value of donations being made by individuals and youth groups, Gamba said.

Meanwhile, OCC President Jon H. Larson said the college's board of trustees and foundation will kick off their own fundraising drive May 4, with the goal of having the planetarium reopened "by this time next year."

"We expect and are aiming at raising the full \$1.5 million to put the planetarium back into operation" as quickly as possible, Larson told trustees at their monthly meeting Monday.

Led by trustee Stephan Leone, the fundraiser will be marketed under the slogan "Reach for the Stars," and Leone will introduce it at 10 a.m. May 4 inside the planetarium building, Larson said.

The Astronomical Society of the Toms River Area has hosted the Astronomy Day open house for years in cooperation with planetarium staff. The event took on urgency this spring, as planetarium supporters organized their fund drive to refurbish the three-decades-old Novins star theater.

College officials closed the planetarium in September after deciding that repeated technical breakdowns and aging equipment meant it made more sense to totally rebuild the facility. But the plans ran aground this winter, when college officials learned an earlier donor's pledge of \$2.5 million was bogus.

Last week, a new local donor known to ASTRA members and planetarium supporters stepped forward with an assurance that he would match smaller donations, to help spin up public enthusiasm for the fund drive. He has dedicated an initial \$50,000 toward the challenge grant, Gamba said.

IF YOU GO

The Save the Planetarium Fund will hold another recruitment and planning meeting 7 tonight in the Knights of Columbus hall at 209 Tennyson Ave., at the corner of Tennyson and Whittier avenues just south of Route 37 eastbound. The group is soliciting for volunteers to help the effort in any way they can.

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