

Planetarium to get aid

County to repair building; others must pay for equipment

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BY KIRK MOORE
TOMS RIVER BUREAU

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TOMS RIVER — The Ocean County Board of Freeholders will pay for renovations to the Robert J. Novins Planetarium building at Ocean County College, leaving the way open for a new fund-raising effort by the college foundation and board of trustees to focus on finding up to \$1.5 million for a new star projector and equipment.

"These buildings out here were all constructed with state and county money. They're all county buildings," Freeholder Director John P. Kelly said a few minutes after assuring college officials and planetarium supporters of construction funding.

"That was part of our concern," said trustee Stephan R. Leone, who is heading the board's "Reach for the Stars" fund-raising campaign. With a commitment for help on construction costs, fund-raisers will concentrate on finding \$1.2 million to \$1.5 million for other aspects of the project, he said.

College officials said construction estimates are still in the works.

"A fresh coat of paint would make me happy. But I'd like a new addition, too. I'm sure it will be something in between," planetarium director Gloria Villalobos said.

The planetarium became an issue this week in the political race for the Republican freeholder nominations, when challenger candidates Suzanne Penna and Peter McCarthy called for the freeholders to advance all renovation money needed to the college and promise temporary fixes to reopen the star theater by September.

"The thing is, this is going to be two years in a row that schoolchildren cannot use the planetarium," said Penna, an OCC nursing student who has pushed the freeholders to intervene on the planetarium and other college issues. "If anything, they should be willing to lend the college money. What good is a county building with no equipment in it?"

Kelly said the amount of work needed to do the project properly precludes the promise of an early re-opening.

"It's good political rhetoric," he said, "but I'm not going to say it's going to happen."

Public donations are still needed to carry through the commitment to restore the planetarium, said Tara Kelly, OCC's vice president for college advancement. According to organizers, the money is already coming in.

Leone accepted a \$750 check from the OCC Adjunct Faculty Association, whose president, Bob Silva, quoted astronaut Neil Armstrong's first words from the moon in calling the donation "one small step."

"It all starts with one small donation," Silva said.

"It's important both for the dollars and the community support it represents," Leone added.

OCC Foundation Chairman David C. Wintrode said Leone and his wife, Judy, will be honorees at the foundation's annual summer gala, and all the proceeds — typically around \$250,000 — will be dedicated to the planetarium restoration. Another trustee, Judge Robert A. Fall, is heading the foundation's planetarium efforts.

Outside the college, the Save the Planetarium Fund is organizing more fundraisers and has already raised several thousand dollars in donations and pledges since the annual Astronomy Day event on campus last month, said fund president Richard Gamba.


The planetarium was shut down in early September 2006 after college officials decided it didn't make financial sense to continue making repairs to the 1970s-era auditorium. At the time, OCC officials thought they were in for a \$2.5 million donation to pay for a sweeping overhaul of the planetarium.

But self-styled donor Edward Devine was exposed as a fraud last winter, and college officials admitted they were back at square one. Gamba, other members of the Astronomical Society of the Toms River Area and planetarium supporters organized



(STAFF PHOTO: PETER J. ACKERMAN, CHIEF PHOTOGRAPHER) Ocean County College trustee Stephan R. Leone speaks at the Robert J. Novins Planetarium at Ocean County College in Toms River on Thursday as his wife, Judy, looks on. The county will provide funds to renovate the building.

within weeks, insisting that the planetarium must reopen.

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