

## OCEAN COUNTY COLLEGE PLANETARIUM

# Stellar pledges to hasten reopening

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TOMS RIVER BUREAU

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TOMS RIVER — Five major donation pledges will enable the Ocean County College Foundation to put up \$375,000 toward new equipment and renovations at the Robert J. Novins Planetarium, speeding plans toward a reopening that college officials now predict for September 2008.

The foundation already has pledged its annual Sept. 8 gala toward raising money for the planetarium, an event that usually brings in at least \$250,000, according to college trustee and fundraising chief Stephan Leone.

"These gifts will help us realize these goals," Leone said at a Friday morning meeting with fellow donors, who all have longtime connections to the college community as trustees or volunteers. All told, the college's fund drive and the private nonprofit Save the Planetarium Fund could achieve the halfway mark toward their minimum \$1.2 million goal by the end of the summer, Leone said.

"The amount frankly is not so important as their commitment," college President Jon H. Larson said.

Another trustee, Judge Robert A. Fall, stressed that organizers also want to raise enough money to provide a durable, longterm standing endowment fund that will keep the planetarium running for many years to come.

"This is a project that will rise out of the community, in addition to the large donors," Fall said. The planetarium needs "an appropriate endowment so that as technology becomes obsolete, we can replace it."

The major donors and their pledge amounts include Leone and his wife, Judith, \$100,000; foundation chairman David Wintrode and his wife, Roberta, \$100,000; Roseanne Citta and the Citta Foundation, \$100,000; Harvey L. York along with his wife, Barbara, and his law firm Novins, York, Pentony & Pagano, \$50,000; and Larson and his wife, Judy, \$25,000.

Those promises enable the foundation to advance money for the planetarium project, and be repaid with the pledges over five years, Leone said. The additional money could expedite progress; planetarium Director Gloria Villalobos said some equipment, particularly a new star projector, will take almost a year to order and have built.

"The equipment has not been ordered yet because we have not secured all the funding," Leone said.

The Board of Freeholders has committed to paying for building renovations, "which will be as expensive as the private donations, when we add it all up," Leone said.

The campus planetarium, which opened in 1974, shut down last September after college officials decided it wasn't worth repairing its old equipment. At the time, they thought they had a commitment for a \$2.5 million donation from Edward J. Devine, who posed as a wealthy businessman when he made the offer that later proved to be a hoax.

Early this year, planetarium supporters organized the Save the Planetarium Fund, a community effort that has raised about \$50,000 so far. College officials started their own drive in cooperation with the college foundation.

Leone said the foundation's "special gifts" committee, joined by the newly recruited Roseanne Citta, will solicit other major donations from the community and look for support from service organizations too. A new schedule lists how donations from \$2,500 to \$500,000 will be

memorialized inside and around a revamped planetarium.

The Novins planetarium is named for its original benefactor, an original college trustee who believed a star theater would be a unique educational attribute for New Jersey's first county college. Time proved him right, Leone and Fall said; in its glory days up to 30,000 elementary school students visited every year, a number that fell to 15,000 as the planetarium's equipment aged.


"This is a unique facility," Fall said, noting it is the only planetarium in the region outside New York City and Philadelphia. "We're hoping it will be a hot ticket, to come and see this new state of the art facility."

A sale-pitch video commissioned by the fundraisers and produced at the college describes how a new planetarium will provide "immersive digital presentations," with a fiber optic star projector that gives much more vivid simulations of the night sky and space with three-dimensional projection.

After rebuilding the auditorium will also get much more use as a college learning space, where the projector can be used for graphic lessons in microbiology, other sciences and even art history, Leone said. With its computer links, a new projector will be able to display real-time pictures too, from weather satellites and space missions.

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I'm actually thrilled that things are progressing well and that there will be a future for the planetarium. I want to see the place open again and have made contributions to both the OCC and Save the Planetarium Fund, fundraising projects.

However . . . I'm a bit disgusted thinking about the fact that this drama has been going on for over a year now. The college fundraising effort has been underway for barely two months and already raised about \$700,000. Why didn't they undertake this from the start? We'd already have a functional planetarium. Better yet, why wasn't this considered before ever making the decision to close it in the first place?

I think it's time we start keeping a much closer eye on the sometimes strange and questionable decision-making process at OCC. Remember, they're operating largely on our tax dollars.

Posted by: JustMyOpinion652 on Sat Jun 23, 2007 12:56 pm

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