



August 26, 2008

Fundraiser is praised by OCC's trustees

DISPUTE OVER PLANETARIUM

By *ERIK LARSEN*
TOMS RIVER BUREAU

Members of the Ocean County College board of trustees broke ranks with the administration and apologized Monday for any cloud the school has cast over a campaign that purports to have raised \$42,000 to help restore the Robert J. Novins Planetarium.

Representatives of "Save the Planetarium Fund, Inc.," led by its president Richard Gamba, attended an afternoon meeting of the trustees to defend their organization and launch a public relations counterattack on the administration.

Much to the frustration of senior officials at OCC, Gamba has not released money his group claims to have raised in tandem with the college foundation's official "Reach for the Stars" planetarium fund, which concluded in March. Gamba's fundraising efforts began after Edward J. Devine — who pledged \$2.5 million from his make-believe trucking empire to save the landmark — was exposed as a fraud. He is now serving a five-year prison sentence.

The college is weeks away from starting renovations on the 34-year-old star theater. Gamba has said his group will not turn over its funds unless the administration agrees to the organization's demands on how to spend the money. Specifically, Save the Planetarium wants a NASA Internet link; a life-sized mannequin dressed in an astronaut suit; a moonscape set where visitors can get their photos taken and carpeting, among other items dedicated for use in a refurbished lobby.

"As one of the trustees who headed up the fundraising effort for the planetarium, I spoke to Mr. Gamba at length, and I appreciate your support," said Stephan R. Leone, who himself had pledged \$100,000 to the official fundraising campaign. "And if there's been any misinterpretation of comments, I want to apologize for it, because I think they're inappropriate as well."

"There should be nothing negative, and a lot of people like negative things," said retired Superior Court Judge Robert A. Fall, another trustee. "They like to put them in the newspaper. We don't want that. We want to work with you, Mr. Gamba. We will work with you. We will achieve a resolution. It's a tremendous community effort, and your group is one of the groups to spearhead that, and you did an excellent job in community awareness."

Tara B. Kelly, vice president of college advancement, who is the chief spokeswoman for the administration, said after the meeting Monday that the college was relieved to hear from Gamba after what she has described as a five-month communication blackout.

"We're very pleased that Mr. Gamba has made contact with us, and we look forward to talking with him about the very generous Save the Planetarium donation," Kelly said.

During the meeting, OCC President Jon H. Larson told the trustees that he would meet with Gamba soon to resolve all of the issues the administration has raised.

"I can assure you, it was never the intention of this board or the foundation to disparage," Carl V. Thulin Jr., board chairman, said.

Suzanne Penna, 37, a nursing student at the college, sat beside Gamba at the meeting and addressed the board in his defense, criticizing statements Kelly made to the Asbury Park Press earlier this month: "What I believe is a horrendous attack made against Mr. Gamba," Penna said. "First of all, the article was riddled with deceit . . . When Kelly maligned Gamba several times in the story and then had closing remarks stating that: 'We don't want to shame him' or whatever, it made me wonder if that was her intention all along."

Gamba has said his group never intended to throw dollars into a general pot for the planetarium. Indeed, the purpose of his group, he has said, was to get the Ocean County Board of Freeholders and the college trustees to save the planetarium on their own, which is ultimately what happened. The freeholders agreed to appropriate \$2 million to make major renovations, while the college foundation agreed to foot the bill for new equipment at a cost of \$1.5 million.

"Without the Ocean County freeholders, the Ocean County College trustees and Ocean County College foundation, none of this could have been done," said Sarah Waters, treasurer and co-founder of Save the Planetarium. "But without Save the Planetarium Fund, none of this would have been started."

Waters accused the college of engaging in an attack to discredit the group and intimidate them into turning over a check the foundation was never promised.

"To disgracefully link Rich Gamba's name with a man who is serving a five-year prison sentence for committing a \$2.5 million fraud in connection with the planetarium: I believe they call that defamation of character."

CARE TO COMMENT? Visit our Web site, www.app.com, and click on this story for the latest developments and to join in the online conversation about this topic in Story Chat.
