

Stars in their eyes

Planetarium supporters launch fundraising drive

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TOMS RIVER — Supporters of the Novins Planetarium at Ocean County College are not going to let that facility remain shut without a fight, and are launching a fundraising drive to reopen the facility funded by the late Toms River philanthropist, Robert J. Novins, a charter trustee of the college.

"Please do not make the mistake of thinking that there are just a few of us geeks that enjoy looking at the stars at night," Richard Gamba, vice president of The Astronomical Society of the Toms River Area told the college trustees recently.

He spoke after a promised gift of millions of dollars to refurbish and operate the planetarium from Edward Devine turned out to be nothing but talk.

Gamba told the trustees other organizations promised money by Devine will not cease to exist, warning, "The Novins Planetarium may very well cease to exist because of his lies, and that fact needs to be clearly understood by everyone."

Gamba told OCC President Jon Larson he understood the shock it must have been to see the promises dissolve, offering the help of ASTRA members to raise funds to get the planetarium running again.

He said it has been closed since September, but no renovations were done because there was no money.

Gamba told Larson he is committed to finding funds to save the planetarium, but cautioned that search may not be successful.

The heart of the problem, Gamba said, is the balky star projector, which needs replacing. That could cost as much as \$600,000, he said, far less than the \$1.5 million in refurbishing costs outlined by the college when it appeared Devine would pay the bill.

Gamba urged the trustees not to try to ease the financial problems of the college by shutting the planetarium.

Responding to an Ocean County Observer editorial mourning the loss of the money to fix the planetarium, but counseling against spending tuition or taxes to resuscitate it, Gamba said the writer "is extremely shortsighted in thinking that removing one of the county's most unique and beloved educational experiences is the way to solve what amounts to a much larger financial problem."

He said more than 30,000 school children were educated annually at the planetarium, along with OCC students and others — three times the enrollment of the college.

That has created a "very large constituency of Ocean County taxpayers that want their tax dollars used for maintaining this uniquely wonderful educational experience," Gamba said.

He said funds for the planetarium donated by the Novins family are being held by the college foundation, although they are significantly less than will be needed to replace the star projector.

ASTRA plans to set up a Save the Planetarium Fund, managed by a local bank, he said.

A Web site is being created, www.savetheplanetarium.org, for that purpose.

And T-shirts are being sold for \$15 each, proclaiming "I'm helping to Save the Planetarium."

The first one was given to Larson.

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Students exit the Novins Planetarium at Ocean County College last year.