

Freeholders urged to save Novins Planetarium

Posted by the Ocean County Observer on 03/8/07

BY DON BENNETT
STAFF WRITER

TOMS RIVER — Ocean County's freeholders were urged yesterday to help save the Novins Planetarium at Ocean County College after a businessman who promised millions to save it turned out to be all talk and no cash.

The college trustees decided a year ago to close the planetarium, which needs major equipment upgrades and a source of revenue to offset a hefty annual operating deficit.

Shortly after that decision was announced the college got an offer it could not refuse from an anonymous donor who turned out to be businessman Edward Devine.

He promised as much as \$2.5 million to refurbish the planetarium and cover the operating deficit for several years.

Earlier this year it was revealed that Devine had made promises of financial aid to many organizations, but had no money to keep them.

That revelation reactivated planetarium supporters who had circulated a petition and received 1,000 signatures on it when it appeared the Novins planetarium would close. The facility is named for the charter OCC trustee whose generosity led to the construction of the planetarium.

Three supporters of the facility showed up yesterday to urge the freeholders to pressure the trustees to find a way to keep the facility open.

Freeholder Joseph H. Vicari said the board might investigate splitting the cost with the college, the county and the private planetarium supporters, each providing a third of the cost.

Richard Gamba of Toms River, vice president of The Astronomical Society of the Toms River Area, told the college trustees last week the cost of a new stargazer, the heart of the planetarium, could be as much as \$600,000. That would keep the planetarium operating.

Suzanne Penna of Berkeley Township said as a student in the Toms River schools, she went to the planetarium to learn astronomy.

She claimed at one time the planetarium could have been fixed for \$44,000, but Gamba told the trustees what is needed is a new stargazer.

Penna said the planetarium was charged for a classroom located in the building, but the college did not give the facility credit for the income produced in the classroom.

Gamba said the administration is looking for funds to save the planetarium but if none are found, will close it.

He said 30,000 visitors, half of them school children, used to visit the planetarium each year.

And he urged the freeholders to convince the trustees to spend some of the millions of dollars in state and county construction aid that will be come there in the years ahead to refurbish the planetarium.

A "Save The Planetarium Fund" has already been created, along with a Web site,

www.savetheplanetarium.org, Gamba said.

T-shirts are being sold with that message for \$15.

J. Randolph Walton of Howell Township charged the "trustees are not serious about restoring" the facility.

They want it to be self-supporting, he said, although that demand is not made of other educational institutions.

Walton said the Save the Planetarium group is "our one chance to shame them into doing something."

He said the planetarium is the only one in the central part of the state.

Penna criticized the freeholders for appointing Toms River attorney Thomas Monahan to the OCC Board of Trustees, saying that panel should be diversified.

"Five members of the board are lawyers. That doesn't sound like diversification to me," Penna said.

"I don't think it was a good appointment," Penna said.

"I've known Tom Monahan for 25 years. His experience is extremely valuable. I can't think of a better appointment," said Freeholder Director John P. Kelly.

He commended Monahan, who was not at the meeting, for agreeing to volunteer to serve as a college trustee.

Robert K. Haelig Jr. of Toms River said after the meeting that Monahan's appointment "sends exactly the wrong message to Ocean County taxpayers."

He is the law partner of Ocean County Republican Chairman George Gilmore and Haelig charged "everywhere Gilmore and Monahan go, taxes and costs go up."

"Monahan's appointment is very bad news for OCC students and Ocean County taxpayers," said Haelig, a former Republican assemblyman and chairman of the Dover Municipal Utilities Authority.

Copyright © 2007 Ocean County Observer. All rights reserved.

Use of this site signifies your agreement to the [Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy](#). (Updated June 7, 2005) Site design by [Asbury Park Press](#) / [Contact us](#)