

County: OCC will reopen planetarium

Posted by the Ocean County Observer on 03/22/07

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TOMS RIVER — Trustees at Ocean County College are expected to announce a plan Monday to reopen the Robert J. Novins Planetarium, which was shut a year ago as an economy move when the state cut state aid to the college by more than \$800,000.

Ocean County Freeholder James F. Lacey said last night the college has a plan to fix the problem of a planetarium needing expensive upgrades and to deal with an annual operating deficit.

But he would not go into details, saying that will be up to the trustees to announce when they meet Monday.

Lacey and Freeholder Director John P. Kelly met with OCC President Dr. Jon Larson and Trustee Chairman Carl Van Thulin to discuss what can be done to save the planetarium now that a benefactor's promise of millions of dollars to upgrade and reopen it vanished when the donor was found to have no money to back up his promise.

"The building's in great shape. We need to solve the problem," Lacey told supporters of the planetarium, adding "I can't give you the plan because I don't know what the plan will be."

Kelly said it is likely to involve the college, the county government and the newly formed Save the Planetarium organization.

He likened the campaign to the one to keeping the federal government from closing Navy Lakehurst.

"We went from Save Navy Lakehurst to the Friends of Navy Lakehurst — working to help the mission," Kelly said.

"Ocean County College is on top of the situation,"

he said. "They're looking at ways to make it work."

"I'm confident they understand the public desire to keep this open. It will remain open to the public," Kelly added.

That brought relief to a number of supporters of the planetarium opened 32 years ago with the gift from a charter trustee of the college for whom it is named.

"Let's get the job done," said OCC Professor Herb Germann.

Sarah Waters of Island Heights said the facility is one of the few planetariums in New Jersey and is needed to be a "spark of interest for children."

Mary Ann Clemente of Barnegat said she too was happy the planetarium will remain open.

"Let something good be of it," said Kathy Lazzaro, here.

Richard Gamba, here, the president of the Save the Planetarium organization said he was "very happy to hear the commitment to work with the college."

Suzanne Penna of Berkeley was not as happy about the illumination coming from the OCC administration.

She said she make an open public records act request for a copy of the college budget and got a single sheet of paper with a column of numbers on it.

"That really isn't right," she said. "It's a little ridiculous," the OCC nursing student said.

She thanked the freeholders for getting her a detailed copy of the spending plan, which covered several pages.

"Get with the people over at the college," she urged.

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