

Reaching for the stars: County citizens pledge to save planetarium

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TOMS RIVER — The man leading one of the fund drives to reopen the Ocean County College planetarium declared fundraisers "will reach our goal" yesterday as a constellation of the county's business stars gathered to put their shoulders behind that effort.

"Every dollar is important," said Stephan Leone, who is spearheading the drive to raise as much as \$1.5 million for state-of-the-art equipment for the planetarium.

Leone, an attorney, businessman, and developer, said Manahawkin auto dealer David Wintrode, chairman of the Ocean County College Foundation, has pledged the proceeds of this year's Summer Gala to the planetarium drive.

That event, held at the college, traditionally raises \$250,000 or more.

Ocean County Freeholder Director John P. Kelly said the county government will pay to refurbish the planetarium building.

"Even the bathrooms do not meet the current code," Kelly said of the scope of the work that needs to be done.

Retired Superior Court Judge Robert Fall is leading the fund drive of the OCC Board of Trustees.

And Richard Gamba of Toms River is leading the community-based fundraising drive through the Save the Planetarium organization.

OCC President Jon Larson said the planetarium is "an important community resource," and the "Jersey Shore's only public planetarium."

"We will make it a viable academic space," Larson said.

Creating a classroom in the building for use by students will provide revenue to offset the operating deficit under the plan approved by the OCC trustees.

Kelly said OCC opened as the Ocean County Community College.

"Somehow we got away from that name," Kelly said, praising the community involvement that will bring the planetarium back to life.

It was closed a year ago when the college trustees, faced with an \$800,000 cut in state aid, looked for economies and decided to end the annual operating deficit at the planetarium and avoid the costs of upgrading it.

Then a donor promised millions of dollars to bail out the planetarium. Earlier this year it was learned those promises were just talk.

Which led to the plan unveiled yesterday to use private and public funds to reopen the building.

Kelly said the freeholders will upgrade the building. Leone said private funds will replace the equipment.

"We believe in the need for the community to raise money, too," Kelly said.

He said it will reopen as a "first-class facility," but that will not happen in September, as two Republicans seeking their party's nomination for freeholder have urged.

Suzanne Penna of Berkeley and Peter McCarthy of Stafford have urged the freeholders to loan the college \$550,000 to open the planetarium in September while plans for future improvements are made.

Kelly rejected that idea.

"In our opinion, the freeholders have not made any real effort to expedite the reopening of the planetarium because they have no real interest in doing so," said Penna and McCarthy in a joint statement.



PETER ACKERMAN PHOTO

Stephan Leone, right, pledged to save the Novins Planetarium at Ocean County College. Leone, shown with his wife, Judy, at the planetarium yesterday, is spearheading the drive to raise as much as \$1.5 million for state-of-the-art equipment.

They criticized Freeholder James Lacey for being on vacation Wednesday when the topic was again discussed at the freeholders' meeting.

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