

OCC Board of Trustees Meeting – Feb 26,2007

I wish to thank the board for giving me this opportunity to speak today. My name is Richard Gamba and I am here before you as a concerned resident of Ocean County and as the Vice-President of The Astronomical Society of the Toms River Area, otherwise known as ASTRA.

Members of the board, as we are all, too well aware, there will be no large donation coming forth from Mr. Edward Devine to help support the Novins Planetarium. It has been clearly shown in the media that Mr. Devine had not only misled Ocean County College, but many other worthwhile causes as well. While I in no way want to diminish the disappointment and heartache each cause has suffered, not everyone is as devastated by his lies as are we here at Ocean County College. Without Mr. Devine's donation, the United Way will not be going away, the Berkeley Little League will not cease to function and the race car driver will not stop racing. However, the Novins Planetarium may very well cease to exist because of his lies, and that fact needs to be clearly understood by everyone.

I recently conveyed to Dr. Larsen my heartfelt sorrow for the shock and disappointment he must have experienced with the unexpected news about the donor. I went on to urge him, to not let this enormous setback deter him from completing the task he has been working so hard to complete, keeping the Novins Planetarium open. I offered the assistance of ASTRA members in whatever fundraising efforts we could help.

In Dr. Larson's reply, he indicated he is committed to searching for the necessary funding to return the planetarium to a state-of-the-art operation, but he also cautioned us to be realistic and not engage in wishful thinking about the outcome. While he welcomes our help in raising funds, he advises we approach this effort with our feet on the ground.

Which brings me to why we are here today. Approximately ten months ago, we presented this board with petitions containing about 1,000 signatures from area residents asking that you do not ALLOW the closure of the Novins Planetarium. With the news of the fraudulent donor now getting out to the public many of these people have contacted ASTRA members asking what is happening and what can they do to help. We are being asked many questions and we need this board to help us provide the answers to the public.

The first question that is asked is "How much money do we really need to Save the Planetarium?" Last year when I was before the board I was told \$1 million dollars was the magic number. When the donor came along and offered 1 million dollars everything was Good-to-Go. However, in my recent communication with Dr. Larson he indicated \$1.5 million was needed. This is quite an increase from 10 months ago. Bottom-line ... what is the number?

Another question that is asked is "Is Saving the Planetarium an ALL or NOTHING proposition?" I know that \$1 to \$1.5 million will revamp and replace ALL systems in the planetarium and, who wouldn't want that, but must it all be accomplished in one fell swoop?

While all the systems are aging, many have been upgraded over the years and have many years of useful life in them. Only the star projector itself is a major problem. While it is possible to repair and refurbish the projector for a reasonable amount of money (approx. \$50 - \$60,000) it will most likely break down again at some point in the near future requiring a similar expenditure. That being the case maybe it is prudent to replace the star projector now. That could be done for \$500 - \$600,000 dollars and the planetarium would be fully functional for many years, a far cry from \$1.5 million.

We are also being asked “Why has the planetarium been closed since September?” Well we all know the obvious answer to that one. The planetarium was closed for refurbishment. Except, in the last six months there has not been any refurbishment going on. And why would there be, the college had not yet received any monies from the donor. So now people are asking “Why have the 10,000 or more school children that would have normally visited during the last six months been deprived of their favorite educational experience?”

In a Feb 21, 2007 editorial in the Ocean County Observer it was cited that it was not the OCC administration’s fault that the donor was lost, there was no donor. I couldn’t agree more; it was not their fault. However the editorial goes on to explain how “the college is back to square one, unable to continue the expense of running the planetarium”. I ask you, how could the college afford NOT TO continue with the expense of running the planetarium?

Herein lies the problem. For those few individuals with the power, that think they are being fiscally responsible, by, as the editorial put it, “looking for financial bleeding to stem”; there are literally thousands of taxpaying individuals in this county that believe, you are looking in the WRONG PLACE, if you are looking at closing the planetarium as the Band-Aid to heal your financial losses.

The editorial writer is extremely shortsighted in thinking that removing one of this county’s most unique and beloved educational experience’s is the way to solve what amounts to a much larger financial problem. I implore this board to not get caught up in the easy solutions, that are more reactive, than actual solutions.

The editorial goes on to say that if the college were to receive additional funding from the state, that the money should be spent on educating the students, which is the college’s primary mission, rather than updating or reopening the planetarium.

Once again we have a problem! What are some people thinking goes on in the planetarium? Education is what is going on! If what we are interested in is educating students, then the planetarium is doing an exceptional job. For the last few years the planetarium has, each year, educated more than 30,000 local area school children, OCC students and other residents; that’s more than 3 times the enrollment at Ocean County College! When it comes to educating people, the planetarium is certainly holding it’s own.

The editorial also reported that the Ocean County Freeholders contributed \$14.1 million to the College budget. I am sure I do not need to remind the board, that the \$14.1 million dollars the Ocean County Freeholders so generously provide to the college, is taxpayer money. And it is clear, that the taxpayers of Ocean County want their planetarium to stay open.

It is very difficult for anyone in this county to believe or accept, that between the \$22.3 million of taxpayer money contributed to college budget, and the \$27 million taxpayer funded building projects on campus, as cited in the Feb 10, 2007 Ocean County Observer article by Don Bennett, that \$500 - \$600,000 of that money couldn't find it's way to replacing the aging star projector and keeping a valuable community education resource open and available to the residents of this and nearby communities to enjoy.

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 that are making this request to keep the planetarium operating, because you would be wrong. Please think long and hard about those 30,000 visitors that come here. Think about their brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents and friends. Think about all those grade school teachers who are required by the New Jersey State Science Standards to teach Astronomy and Space Science and depend on the planetarium for helping them meet those standards.

This is not just a handful of people, this is a very large constituency of Ocean County taxpayers that want their tax dollars used for maintaining this uniquely wonderful educational experience that not only benefits the young, but is equally loved by the elderly and all those in between alike.

The public is looking to you for answers to these and many other questions surrounding the planetarium. The public is willing to help with funding if it is needed. There are currently funds being held at the college foundation for the planetarium. The Friends of the Novins Planetarium Fund, has been around for many years, and has been used to pay for some of the earlier upgrades to the planetarium theater. *(The last major project being in 1986)* Because of that fact, this Fund currently has only about \$2,000. However, there is a second fund, the Robert J. Novins Memorial Fund, which is reported to have about \$78,000. If these numbers are correct, and the Memorial Fund is in fact earmarked for the planetarium, the planetarium currently has \$80,000 to open the doors of its fund raising efforts.

ASTRA has considered the advice of Dr. Larson and will be taking a realistic approach to fundraising, which is why we are here today. But in doing so we are not only going to keep our feet on the ground. We plan to hit the ground running. ASTRA will be setting up a third party fund to be managed by a local area bank where we can accept pledges and donations to the SAVE THE PLANETARIUM FUND.

In addition, there is a website being constructed as we speak (www.SavethePlanetarium.org) which will contain information on the status of the fund drive and act as a clearinghouse for all information about the planetarium and the fund raising efforts. We will be soliciting public and private individual donations as well as corporate and group donations.

One of the first fund raising programs we will be offering is an “*I’m helping to Save the Planetarium*” t-shirt which will be sold for \$15 ea.

For his past efforts this year and for his continuing support during the coming fundraising effort we would like to present the very first “*I’m Helping to Save the Planetarium*” t-shirt to Dr. Jon Larson.

We would be very pleased to provide each of the board members with a t-shirt of their own . . . for \$15 ea.

Thank you all for your attention and patience.