

Board of Freeholders Meeting – March 7, 2007

Hello my name is Richard Gamba. I wish to thank the members of the board for allowing me this opportunity to speak to you today. I am here before you as a very concerned resident of Ocean County and as the Vice President of the Astronomical Society of the Toms River Area otherwise known as ASTRA.

A little more than ten months ago I came before this Board to ask for your help, in persuading Ocean County College to reconsider its planned closure of the Robert J. Novins Planetarium. At that time I presented this Board with petitions containing approximately 1,000 signatures of Ocean County residents that were asking for the same thing.

Within a few days of that Board meeting the College announced it had been contacted by an anonymous donor who was willing to provide the funding needed to refurbish the Planetarium and keep it running for the next ten years. As we are now, all too well aware, the donor turned out to be fraudulent, and there will be no saving donation.

With the loss of the donor there has been no formal commitment on the part of Ocean County College to provide the necessary funding to insure the continuation of the Novins Planetarium. While the college has indicated it would continue to seek funding, it has also indicated that if it were unsuccessful, the Planetarium would close.

As it was before, it is now. The residents of Ocean County want **THEIR** Planetarium to remain open.

Ocean County is truly blessed to have such a unique and valuable educational resource right here in our midst. To let this gem fade away would be a disgrace to our community.

Each year over 30,000 visitors come to the Novins Planetarium to experience the night sky and ponder their place in this vast universe. Over half of these visitors are school children from all around Ocean County and beyond, that can't wait to go on their most favorite field trip of the year. It is just these kinds of experiences that stimulate the hearts and minds of our children and inspire many of them to pursue future endeavors in the sciences.

Two weeks from now you will be holding meetings on the budget for Ocean County. In that budget you will be generously giving \$14.1 million of taxpayer money towards the Ocean County College operating budget. That amount is in addition to the \$8.2 million of taxpayer money coming from the state. Over the next six years, in addition to the annual operating budget amounts, there will be over \$51 million in construction monies given to Ocean County College.

It is very difficult for anyone in this county to believe, or accept, that within this \$73.3 million of taxpayer money contributed to the college, that some portion of this money couldn't find it's way to keeping such a valuable community resource open and available.

Members of the Board, take note, we are NOT asking you to provide more money towards saving the planetarium. Although, if you insisted, we would be most appreciative.

However, we the taxpayers of Ocean County, are asking that you use your good relationship and influence with Ocean County College to remind the Board of Trustees to serve the residents of Ocean County, by using some of those tax dollars, so generously provided to them, to find a way to fund the refurbishment and ongoing operations of the Novins Planetarium.

With that in mind, I would like to announce the formation of Save the Planetarium, Inc. a non-profit corporation that others and I have established with the help of our attorney, Michael York of Novins, York, Pentony & Pagano, of Toms River. The purpose of this Fund will be to solicit public and private individual donations as well as corporate and group donations to be used to insure the continuation of the Novins Planetarium.

In addition, we have a website **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.

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 available for a minimum donation of \$15 ea.

As caretakers of our county tax dollars, we only ask, are you also willing to act as caretakers of our beloved planetarium.

I wish to thank the members of the board for your time and attention to this important community matter.