

For Immediate Release

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YSU planetarium undergoes \$750,000 overhaul

Full-dome videos, a new star projector and the latest technological bells and whistles are among the improvements planned in a major renovation of the Ward Beecher Planetarium at Youngstown State University.

The improvements, which begin this summer and conclude in spring 2007, are funded through a \$750,000 grant from the Ward Beecher and the Florence Simon Beecher Foundations.

“After these improvements, we will be one of the best – if not *the* best – medium-sized planetariums in the nation,” said Warren Young, retired YSU professor of astronomy and former long-time director of the planetarium.

“Everything we do in the planetarium will be much more impressive. Students and the public will be amazed and pleased.”

The planetarium, opened in 1967 through a gift from the Ward Beecher Foundation, is used to present hundreds of free public shows and school field trips annually. In addition, more than 1,000 YSU students take introductory astronomy classes in the facility each year.

“Any facility that has seen 37 years of use must necessarily show its age, and this is the case now facing the planetarium,” said Sharon Shanks, planetarium lecturer. “The time is upon us when major facility renovations and upgrades are needed to prepare the planetarium for the next 40 years of education, wonder and awe.”

The renovations begin this summer with replacing the planetarium’s 150 seats, installing new carpeting, making improvements to the entry way and cleaning the 40-foot diameter planetarium dome.

The planetarium closed in June for the renovations and is scheduled to open again for public shows in October, Shanks said.

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Also this summer, a new \$200,600 Spitz's SciDome Projection System will be installed, which will allow the showing of video on the full dome of the planetarium. Currently, the planetarium can show video only on parts of the dome.

"Full-dome video is one of the most significant new improvements in planetarium technology and is used to present the wonders of the universe in a stunning new way," said Patrick Durrell, assistant professor of astronomy and the planetarium's current director.

"It will be a tremendous addition to our shows," Young said. "It's like a trip to Disney World."

"It's like you're sitting inside the video," Shanks said.

The second phase of the improvements begins June 2006 and includes installation of a new \$489,000 star projector. The projector, which Shanks calls "the heart" of the planetarium, replaces the facility's original projector that was installed in 1967.

"The technology has changed tremendously in 40 years," Durrell said. "When we went to a demo of this new projector, we were in awe."

The new projector is capable of moving constellation outlines, realistic planets, sharp stars, binary star systems and digital special effects for the sun, moon and planets, Shanks said. It also will be especially helpful in teaching school students about moon phases, she said.

The final phase of the improvements in spring 2007 includes the installation of a new \$59,000 video projection system, featuring three high-definition video projectors.

"We cannot wait for people to see shows in the new, improved facility," Durrell said.