

Pattonville observatory gets new telescope

The stars at night just got a little bit brighter, thanks to a new telescope recently installed at a long-standing observatory/planetarium facility at Pattonville Heights Middle School. Exactly 41 years ago to the month, the Pattonville School District became the first school or college in Missouri to have a planetarium and observatory facility located in one of its buildings. The facility is used to provide instruction on space and astronomy to Pattonville students at all levels and to provide an opportunity for community members to observe the nighttime sky through regular public astronomy nights.

The new telescope, a 10-inch Meade telescope, replaces a 20-year old telescope that had been installed in the 1980s, said Dr. Paul Markovits, Pattonville's science coordinator. It was purchased for \$4,000 with a grant through the NASA ROSES ORIGIN program as part of an Educational and Public Outreach sub-grant. The new telescope is an improvement over the previous equipment, which was becoming more and more difficult to repair due to scarcity of parts, said Markovits.

"It has refined optics that provide 15 percent higher light transmission than our old scope," Markovits said. "It can be programmed and remotely sited on almost any location in the sky. The image that it provides has photographic sharpness."

The grant also provided \$3,500 for 10 Sunspotters, which are instruments that let students safely view the sun and observe phenomena such as sun spots, solar flares and the apparent movement of the sun in the sky. The grant also provided a tripod for the old telescope so it can be used in other locations.

Pattonville had benefit of funds through the NASA grant thanks to a partnership with Washington University and Northern Illinois University. Dr. Kathy Kitts, a professor at Northern Illinois, was originally awarded the grant while she worked on her doctorate at Washington University and served as Pattonville's observatory and planetarium instructor. Dr. Kitts received the grant to work with her students at Washington University and at Pattonville. The grant followed her to Northern Illinois University.

Pattonville maintenance workers recently installed a new plate to hold the telescope, and the new equipment made its debut during a Jan. 11 public astronomy night. The next public astronomy nights will take place from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m., Friday, Jan. 25 and from 7 to 9 p.m., Friday, Feb. 8 and 22. The observatory is located in a dome atop Pattonville Heights Middle School, 195 Fee Fee Road in Maryland Heights. Interested persons may call (314) 213-8900 and request extension 5011 for recorded announcements about upcoming public programs.