

Newsday.com

News | Entertainment | Sports | Jobs | Cars | Real Estate | Apartments | ShopLocal | Place An Ad

am New York

MONTAUK

New place to see stars

20-inch telescope assembled as fundraising continues for construction of research-caliber observatory in Theodore Roosevelt County Park

BY SUSANA ENRIQUEZ
Newsday Staff Writer

November 17, 2006

Long a destination for fisherman and surfers, Montauk is on track to becoming a haven for stargazers as well.

The Montauk Observatory project is gaining traction with the arrival of a 20-inch telescope that was assembled Wednesday at its future home in Theodore Roosevelt County Park.

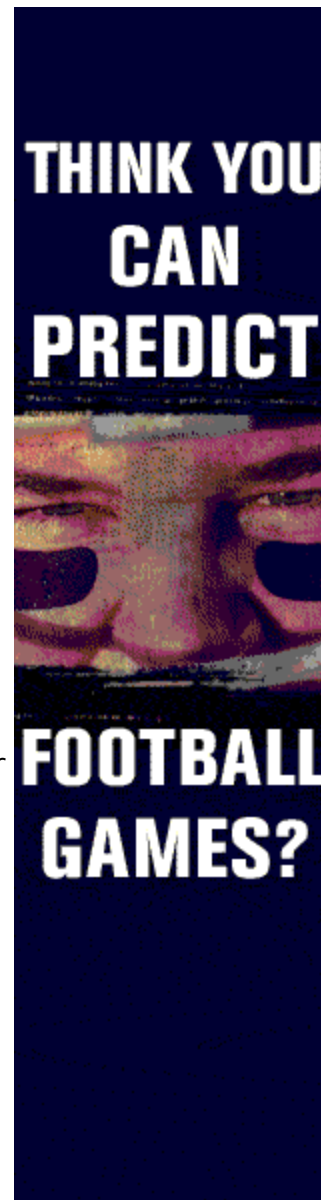
"It's exciting," said Suffolk County Legis. Jay Schneiderman, who used to be a science teacher. "We had goose bumps."

The Montauk Observatory is a not-for-profit organization formed about a year ago to fund a research-caliber observatory on the East End. Currently, there is one other observatory in Southold.

The arrival of the telescope, a Meade RCX400, is the first step in the observatory coming to fruition. The next step is to raise about \$500,000 for the construction of the building and for the renovation of an existing cabin to serve as a meeting place.

Schneiderman said he first started thinking about an observatory about 20 years ago when he was trying to establish a nature center and wanted stargazing to be a part of it.

In 2005, after becoming a legislator, he introduced a bill to get \$200,000 to



pay for an observatory, but it was vetoed.

"It was really frustrating," Schneiderman said. "It forced me to go out and raise money."

After the organization formed, Schneiderman was able to get a \$25,000 grant from the county. That became the seed money, along with private donations, to get the telescope, which cost about \$30,000.

On Wednesday, Schneiderman was at the Montauk School telling the kids all about the telescope.

"They're as excited as I am, and they can't wait to use it," he said. "I want kids to be able to have that moment of awe, when their jaws drop when they're looking at a nebula and they can't believe it's out there."

Schneiderman said he hopes to break ground at the site in a year. In the meantime, he said the observatory will hold a stargazing event for the public sometime next month.

Once it's finished, the Montauk Observatory may dethrone the Custer Institute, an observatory in Southold which claims to have "the darkest skies of any observatory on Long Island."

"Montauk is slightly darker," said David Cohn, an astronomer and volunteer with the institute. "I don't know if it's worth the trip for residents of the North Fork to go to the South Fork. If they're interested, people should go to both locations and judge for themselves."

Cohn said the two observatories will be collaborating on public programs, such as lectures, classes and workshops on astronomy and related sciences.

The institute will also direct people to the observatory for meteor showers and other astronomic events, Cohn said.

"Astronomy is just one of those fields, especially when people can experience it first hand, that ignites curiosity in people and leads them to bigger questions like 'Where did we come from? Where did the universe come from?'" Cohn said.

Searching for answers, he said, leads people to other sciences, philosophy and even religion.

"It's a fire starter for the mind," he said.

Copyright 2006 Newsday Inc.