

Observatory gives visitors chance to look into space

BY JIM WRIGHT
NJMC

The New Jersey Meadowlands Commission's William D. McDowell Observatory in DeKorte Park offers a unique way to see the great outdoors once the sun sets. The observatory and its research-grade telescope offer spectacular views of the great beyond, with the nearest object roughly 221,000 miles away—the moon.

What's more, the observatory offers free public open houses at 8 and 9 p.m. every Monday and Wednesday, unless clouds impede the view of the night sky. It just might be the best deal around.

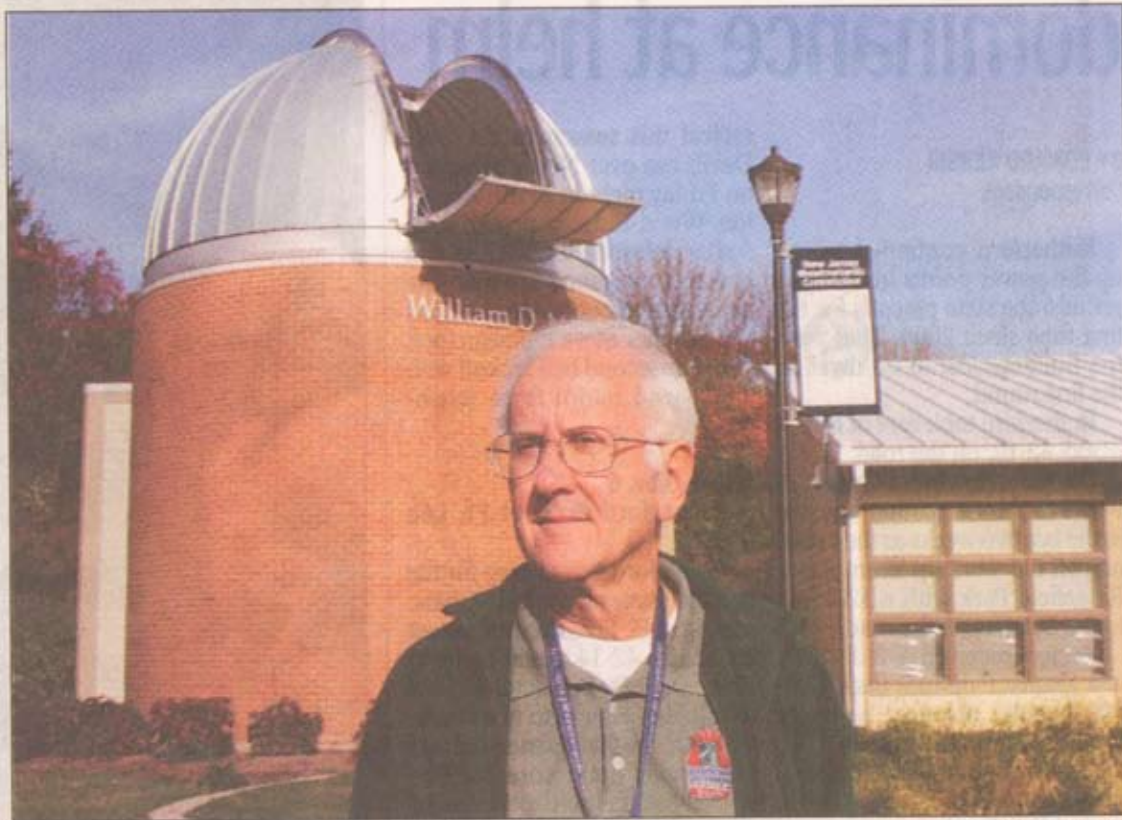
The observatory began the twice-weekly public sessions 15 months ago, and they have been a big success. "Given that this has not been the best year weather-wise, we have had an amazing number of people," says Astronomer John Sloan, the observatory's director. "In the first year alone, we had more than 2,000 people at our public open houses."

The attraction, of course, is the night sky, as seen through a 20-inch, f/9 Classical Cassegrain Telescope, manufactured by Optical Guidance Systems. The telescope is equipped with light-pollution filters to provide primo looks at the moon, the planets and beyond.

"Right now and through November, the big attraction is Jupiter, which we can see beautifully," says Dr. Sloan.

Also on view this month are the moon, Uranus and Neptune.

"The public response has been great," says Dr. Sloan. "We have



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John Sloane in front of the observatory.

even had parents bring preschool children, and we show them Jupiter and explain about planets to them. It's great learning experience for all children."

If you are planning to visit the observatory, consider these four bits of advice from Dr. Sloan:

- Dress for the weather. "The observatory is neither heated in the winter nor cooled in the summertime, so whatever the outside temperature is, that's going to be the temperature inside the dome. The coldest temperature we recorded last winter was eight

degrees, and we did have people show up."

- "Expect a little bit of a wait, even with 10 or 15 people there. You form a line and wait your turn to take a look at whatever celestial objects we're looking at that night."

- "Don't be disappointed if it gets cloudy during the course of the evening and viewing is impaired." There's no controlling the weather.

- "The best time is a clear night during a first quarter moon. When the moon is full, it washes out the

fainter objects on the sky, and you don't have much contrast on the moon itself."

For more information about the observatory, and a detailed viewing schedule, go to www.njmeadowlands.gov/ec.

NJMC Communications Officer Jim Wright maintains the Commission's daily nature blog, meadowblog.net - featuring beautiful photography and the latest info on the region's abundant natural wonders.