

“How the Community Observatory Works”

By Dale van Dam, Dean of Instruction, El Dorado Center of Folsom Lake College

If you've visited the Cameron Park Rotary Community Observatory (located off Green Valley Road in Placerville) you know what a significant community resource this facility has become. Since opening in May 2006, more than 17,000 visitors have enjoyed the experience of visiting the Observatory and being both entertained and educated by a dedicated, all-volunteer Observatory Docent staff. Whether you've visited or not, you may be interested in how the Observatory came into being and how it is run.

The Observatory was conceived and built as a community project to celebrate Rotary International's centennial anniversary by the Cameron Park Rotary Club (Rotarians). The Rotarians designed, raised the funds for and solicited donations of materials and labor to construct the Observatory. The ongoing operation of the Observatory is a great example of a local community partnership, involving the Rotarians, the El Dorado County Office of Education (EDCOE) and the El Dorado Center of Folsom Lake College (part of the Los Rios Community College District [LRCCD]). The land upon which the Observatory building is situated belongs to EDCOE and the Observatory building and equipment was also gifted to EDCOE. LRCCD provides the maintenance and security for the Observatory and has the responsibility for staffing when the Observatory is open.

Operation of the Observatory is overseen by a collaborative group of representatives from EDCOE, LRCCD, Rotarians and Lead Docents. This group meets on a regular basis to provide oversight and guidance with regard to operation of the Observatory. The Docents are an independent group sanctioned by the Observatory partners, who are trained to operate the telescopes and provide astronomical information to the visiting public. The Docents are an incredibly dedicated group: so dedicated that they run their own in-house educational and training programs to help insure that Observatory visitors enjoy a quality experience and other outreach such as this bi-monthly column in the Mountain Democrat.

Since its opening, the equipment housed by the Observatory has been enhanced by community donations of both equipment and funds. Recognizing the value of the Observatory as a resource to the community, individuals, local companies, and local service clubs have donated equipment such as a “sky camera,” additional telescopes, a solar telescope, and a video monitor to enhance visitors' Observatory experience. As a truly community endeavor, we would love to have you or your company participate in the operation of the Observatory by providing financial or “in-kind” support; if you are interested, contact information is provided at the end of this column.

The primary purpose of the Observatory is astronomical education. As such, the Observatory is reserved for use by K-12 and college classes Monday through Thursday evenings and is open to the public (without reservations) on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings. In addition to week night visits by strictly educational groups, numerous entities, including local boy- and girl-scout troops, other service clubs, professional associations, and fraternal organizations have visited the Observatory since 2006. In addition, a subset of volunteer Docents is specially trained to provide solar programs (using specialized telescopes and filters) either at the Observatory or at remote locations.

Use of the property containing the Observatory continues to evolve. In 2009, EDCOE installed a permanent restroom and storage facility, located adjacent to the Observatory building. Currently,

EDCOE and LRCCD are working with the local Master Gardeners group (through the University of California extension) to create a community demonstration garden on the land south of the Observatory. The Rotarians recently completed the installation of an outdoor amphitheater that will seat 35 to 40 Observatory visitors and facilitate delivery of the “naked-eye” star tours that Observatory visitors enjoy as part of their experience. This outdoor facility will allow Docents to accommodate additional Observatory visitors during evening programs. Additional future plans for the western portion of the EDCOE property include installation of athletic fields (for day use only to avoid light pollution that would impact Observatory use).

For more information about Observatory educational programs or for information about how you can support those programs, please contact:

*Dale A. van Dam, Dean of Instruction
El Dorado Center of Folsom Lake College
6699 Campus Drive, Placerville, CA 95667
Ph: 530/642-5615 or email: vandamd@flc.losrios.edu*