

Board OKs Minneapolis planetarium

The County Board's vote brings the original plans for the astronomy center at Minneapolis' new downtown Central Library closer to reality.

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I went.....

I remember going to the planetarium when I was younger. Whether with school outings or a special trip downtown it was always an adventure. [... read more](#) You knew you were close when you saw the dome on the 1 storey section of the library. Walking through the glass doors and approaching the planetarium section you were wondering what you would be seeing. First you lined up in anticipation to be finally led into the dark curved room with black walls. When your eyes adjusted to the darkness and the black lights, you saw da-glo interpretations of the solar system and outer space. Then you were ushered into the planetarium itself. You were seated in the dimmed dome with the red glow of the sunset on it. You then noticed quietly in the background strains of music. As you waited it was slowly getting louder. When I was older I learned it was Ravel's Bolero. As the last repeat of the motif was dying the dome changed to the night sky and the show was beginning. After the show was over and we were all in awe of what we had just seen, another surprise was in store. We were led down the stairs into the basement museum. It was nothing like The Science Museum in St. Paul, but, to me at grade school age it was amazing. They had wild animals done up by a taxidermist, drawings of various plants and a collection of various rocks and minerals. Then came the prize of the whole trip. We quietly made our way to the glass case that held a real mummy and its sarcophagus, straight from ancient Egypt and the land of the pharaohs. It would be a shame if this new planetarium were not built so another generation of children could witness what my generation saw. Maybe it would spawn future astronomers, astrophysicists, astronauts, mineralogists, archaeologists etc.. I for one would love to go there again to bring back childhood memories and maybe do the same for future generations.

A proposal to add a planetarium to the top of Minneapolis' new Central Library passed its biggest hurdle Tuesday with approval by the Hennepin County Board.

Though the vote was not unanimous -- two of the seven board members voted against it, saying the county should not be financially involved in a project they believe mostly benefits Minneapolis -- supporters of the project were elated. The proposal now goes to the Minneapolis City Council.

"We're thrilled," said Peggy Leppik, president of the Minnesota Planetarium Society. "We could not go forward without this. We feel pretty good."

The new downtown library was built to support a planetarium on its top floors. The state already has committed \$22 million in bonding authority for the project, and the Planetarium Society is responsible for raising another \$20.5 million, including \$4 million for an endowment fund to generate operating money.

Even supportive county commissioners wanted to make it clear that the county's financial responsibility would be limited, keeping its yearly contribution to \$250,000 or less.

The planetarium's annual operating costs are estimated at \$2.6 million. Some of the county's support could come in supplying such utilities as heat and lights.

Commissioners also approved amendments stating that they do not want authority to issue debt for the project if fundraising falls short. They also required that Minneapolis contribute at least as much toward planetarium operating costs as the county does.

Commissioners Penny Steele and Linda Koblick opposed the proposal. Steele noted that debate followed a discussion of a tight 2009 county budget and possible budget cuts. She said Minneapolis should pay for operating costs.

"It's located in their city, and they benefit from it," she said.

Koblick said she was worried that the downtown site didn't have enough parking or security for the planetarium. "It is not the role of Hennepin County to provide family fun entertainment in Minneapolis," she said.

Leppik said she welcomed board amendments limiting the county's financial involvement in the project, saying they clarified the issues. The county's approval frees the society to begin fundraising.

Though the sagging economy and competition from other nonprofits for donated dollars would seem to present a fundraising challenge, Leppik said she and the planetarium board are not deterred.

"Obviously it makes our job more challenging, but we expect to meet our goal," she said. "It's different from every other capital campaign out there. There's nothing like the planetarium."

Preliminary plans call for the planetarium to occupy about 38,000 square feet on the fifth and sixth floors of the library. Roughly 11,000 square feet would be devoted to public displays and exhibits. A domed theater would seat about 200 people.

The county board's vote requires the Minneapolis City Council to vote on the planetarium by the end of the year. Council Member Scott Benson said he hopes that the council will review a planetarium resolution within the next three weeks.

The county and city and the Planetarium Society are expected to ask the Legislature for a state operating subsidy like the one that goes to the Science Museum of Minnesota. They also will seek an extension of the bonding authority beyond the Jan. 1, 2011, expiration date.