

Fremont Peak Observatory Association

P.O. Box 1376
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(831) 623-2465

Bringing Astronomy to the Public

CUTS IN CALIFORNIA PARK FUNDING: A TOTAL ECLIPSE OF THE STARS

Thousands of students, teachers and families fear Fremont Peak Observatory may be lost forever

August 18, 2009 – San Juan Bautista, CA – California State Parks officials recently told the non-profit, volunteer based Fremont Peak Observatory Association (FPOA) that due to budget cuts, Fremont Peak State Park will close and the use of the observatory will be lost.

Doug Brown, President of FPOA observed, “the lost educational and research services will be far-reaching, and their value greatly exceeds the cost of funding the park.” For over 23 years Fremont Peak Observatory has been a favorite destination for astronomers, scientists, teachers and students.

Fremont Peak is a popular camping and hiking destination in Central California and the observatory adds to an already rich experience. Over 1,500 visitors per year take advantage of free access to telescopes and guided tours of the night sky. Ron Dammann, Director of Programs and Instrumentation noted, “we’ve been giving two or more standing-room-only presentations each night, and have had visitors looking through the telescopes well past midnight.”

Fremont Peak Observatory Association hosts hundreds of students from local schools each year. Many cash-strapped teachers count on the observatory to provide a rewarding, hands-on, zero-cost astronomy experience. FPOA’s intern program for students at Hartnell College in Salinas, “is an empowering experience that has motivated under-represented students to transfer into engineering, astrophysics and aerospace programs at major universities” notes Andy Newton, Hartnell College Planetarium Director.

The cornerstone of the observatory operation is the volunteer astronomers who built the observatory, and who staff the public programs simply for the reward of sharing with the public the wonders of the night sky. The observatory also hosts cutting edge scientific research. Professionals such as Dr. Peter Jenniskens, a NASA meteor and comet researcher and Dr. Juergen Wolf, an astronomer who searches for planets outside of our solar system use the observatory for precise scientific research.

Closure of the park will mean the loss of all these programs and services, perhaps permanently.

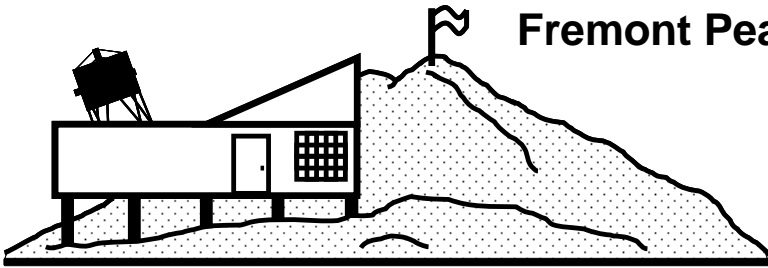
Please Join Us at Fremont Peak for More Information

On August 22, 2009 at 5:00 PM the staff of FPOA will host an informational event and BBQ at Fremont Peak Observatory to provide information and to discuss the loss of this local treasure with community leaders, members of the public, and news media.

To learn more about visit www.fpoa.net.

For a media fact sheet for driving directions visit www.fpoa.net/media.

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FPOA Science and Education Programs

For a quarter century FPOA has delivered night and solar public programs to over 1500 people yearly. The facility was built and is operated on volunteer labor and donations. There is no charge for our informal, family-friendly programs given May through October with on most Saturday nights except those near a full moon. Once a month visitors can view the sun through telescopes using safe solar filters.

As part of our mission, we partner with schools in the Monterey Bay, Hollister, and the San Francisco Bay Area to tailor a rich educational experience for K-12 and college students, both through field trips to Fremont peak, and classroom presentations. Regular visitors include Britain Middle School in Morgan Hill, Rancho San Justo in Hollister, Monterey Peninsula College, Hartnell College, and the International School of Monterey. FPOA typically delivers a dozen special programs a year to various community organizations including scout troops and church groups.

We provide information for school teachers on ways to supplement their curriculum using local astronomy-related resources beyond FPOA. See our Bay Science Project seminar on integrating local astronomy resources into K-12 education at <http://fpoa.net/teachers/index.html>.

FPOA provides Salinas-based Hartnell College students internships as part of the Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics Internship Project (STEM IP) (<http://www.hartnell.edu/smi/index.html>).

Eight Reasons Why Fremont Peak is a Unique Location for Astronomy Outreach:

1. At 2800' elevation, there is 10% less absorption of light by the atmosphere than at sea level. Since astronomical objects are very faint, this is important. Astronomers often pay large amounts of money to coat their optics to reduce light loss by several percent.
2. Being outside of large cities, the amount of light pollution (brightening of the sky by reflected city lights) is lower, allowing much fainter objects to be seen, photographed, or measured.
3. The tops of the coastal stratus clouds (fog) often are lower than the Peak, which significantly reduces light pollution from surrounding cities.
4. The prevailing winds are from the west and, having blown over thousands of miles of cool, flat ocean before arriving at the Peak, the air flow is very laminar, or smooth, and clean. This reduces the amount of atmospheric turbulence, thereby making astronomical images much more crisp and clear.
5. The park is served by a well-maintained county road and contains a parking area, making public access feasible for public programs.
6. Access to the observatory area is controlled, allowing illumination by headlights and streetlights to be limited. Such light sources can instantly ruin people's dark adaptation, which can take half an hour to recover. They can similarly ruin sensitive astronomical measurements and images.
7. Astronomy is done late at night, so people are sleepy after observing. Rather than driving home tired and in the dark, people drive home rested and in daylight after sleeping in the campground.
8. The campgrounds allow community organizations such as scout and church groups to combine group camping with an astronomical experience, thereby increasing visitorship.