



JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

Director William Alexander speaks at the John C. Wells Planetarium at James Madison University in Harrisonburg.

It's standing room only at JMU's planetarium

The renovated facility is attracting crowds in Harrisonburg

BY CARLOS SANTOS
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James Madison University's newly renovated planetarium has been a hit with the folks in Harrisonburg.

Since the \$1.3 million renovation was completed and the re-dedicated planetarium opened in September, the 66-seat facility has been packed every weekend.

"It's exciting that there's been so much interest," said William Alexander, the director of the planetarium and an assistant professor of astronomy at JMU. "Basically at every public show, there's standing room only."

JMU planetarium

For schedule and information go to www.jmu.edu/planetarium

A planetarium is essentially a domed theater in which the night sky is projected onto the curved ceiling above the audience.

The new technology offered by the JMU planetarium allows the audience to be immersed in the constellations and planets.

"We can give a cool tour of the solar system," Alexander said.

Virginia has about a dozen planetariums, but the JMU planetarium — named for John C. Wells — is the only one in the Shenandoah Valley and now says it is the most advanced in the state.

The planetarium was originally built in 1974 but had begun to falter in recent years. "The equipment was over 30 years old and obsolete. Parts weren't available. We had to choose to close down or renovate," Alexander said.

The renovation including building the new 30-foot inner dome, a new projection system, new chairs and an entirely new heating and air-conditioning system, Alexander said.

The planetarium is mostly used to teach JMU students about astronomy but is also used by local public schools and home-schooled children as well as the general public.

"We want to make it a community resource," he said.

Shows, which are free, are held for the public twice every Saturday.

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