

Tamworth Regional Astronomy Club Inc

“Promoting the science of Astronomy”

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Media Release

27 April 2018

All systems go for Tamworth’s Astronomy and Science Education Centre and Planetarium with \$1.8M funding announcement!

The sky is now very much the limit for the Tamworth region following the NSW Government’s approval of a \$1.8 million funding application by Tamworth Regional Council for the construction of an Astronomy and Science Education Centre and Planetarium complex and associated facilities at Tamworth’s Victoria Park precinct, paving the way for exciting new astronomy and science related tourism, educational and research opportunities in our region.

Speaking at today’s funding announcement by the NSW Member for Tamworth, Mr Kevin Anderson MP, President of the Tamworth Regional Astronomy Club Inc (TRAC), Leigh Tschirpig, said the Club is absolutely thrilled with the provision of this facility under the Restart NSW Regional Growth – Environment and Tourism Program. Mr Tschirpig said the Centre will open up the wonders of the night sky, not only to residents across the Tamworth district, but also to many national and international visitors to our region, providing the opportunity to view our incredible universe through an array of large, high quality astronomical instruments, including the ‘Jos Roberts’ 36 inch Reflector Telescope, one of the largest privately owned and publicly accessible telescopes in Australia.

“The importance and long-term value of the new Centre to our region cannot be overstated, particularly in relation to opening up new astronomy related tourism activities in the Tamworth district, creating many exciting scientific educational opportunities for students and also many research opportunities for both professional and amateur astronomers,” Mr Tschirpig said.

“With the construction of the Centre, TRAC will be stepping up the work it has been undertaking to further explore these major tourism opportunities for the Tamworth district, with the aim of linking in with astronomy facilities and organisations across regional areas of NSW in centres such as Coonabarabran, Armidale, Narrabri, Dubbo, Parkes, regions in the ACT and reaching further inter-state, providing many mutual benefits for these regional communities,” he said.

“The Tamworth district has a great deal to offer visitors such as the annual Country Music Festival, first class sporting and recreational facilities, outstanding food and produce, our fascinating history, heritage, culture and natural environment to name just a few. Our region also proudly boasts some of the clearest views of the night sky in the Southern Hemisphere which will now be very much on the list of things to see and do in the Tamworth district,” Mr Tschirpig said.

The project will see the construction of several buildings at Victoria Park including a Roll-Off Roof Observatory to house the Club’s collection of large optical telescopes and related equipment, including the massive ‘Jos Roberts’ 36 inch Reflector. A separate observatory will also be built for the historic Hewitt Camera, one of only two high precision 34 inch, f/1 satellite tracking cameras in the world constructed in England during the Cold War era at a cost of several million British Pounds. The Hewitt Camera, which was decommissioned and stored for a number of years, was acquired by TRAC in 2017 and has recently been converted to digital imaging capability for astronomical research under a project led by the Club’s Committee member, Raymond McLaren of Andromeda Engineering at Moonbi.

Mr Tschirpig said the central building in the complex will be the Astronomy and Science Education Centre and Planetarium, featuring a large indoor public gallery for astronomical and other scientific presentations, a science museum and astronomy displays, education and research library facilities as well as an adjoining domed planetarium theatre, providing simulated views of the night sky, audio-visual tours through the universe and related presentations. A solar telescope will be available allowing the Sun to be safely viewed during daytime activities and the Club's radio astronomy enthusiasts will be installing a radio telescope and related equipment at the Centre. There are also plans to develop a sculpture garden themed on the history and advancement of astronomy and science.

The funding will also see the construction of a new toilet block and a redeveloped car park, providing major benefits for the many community organisations utilising the Victoria Park precinct such as the Friends of Tamworth Regional Botanic Gardens, the Tamworth and District Model Engineers and the Tamworth Men's Shed.

"In regard to the Centre's educational possibilities, TRAC's Honorary Life Member, former Tamworth High School Student, Dr Stephen Kane, was inspired to seek a career in astronomy following a school visit to the former Pyramid Planetarium at Kootingal many years ago. Stephen is now Associate Professor of Planetary Astrophysics in the Earth Sciences Department at the University of California, Riverside and a world leading discover of exoplanets circulating other stars, including potential habitats for life. Who knows what future opportunities may arise for students who can access the Centre's telescopes, explore the heavens first hand and learn more about our incredible universe," Mr Tschirpig said.

On behalf of TRAC, Mr Tschirpig thanked the NSW Member for Tamworth, Mr Kevin Anderson MP, the NSW Government, Mayor of Tamworth, Cr Col Murray, the Councillors and management of Tamworth Regional Council, particularly Ms Genevieve Harrison, TRAC Vice-Presidents Mr Garry Copper and Mr Warwick Schofield, Club Publicity Officer, Cr Phil Betts, the Club's Committee, especially Dr Ray Hare, TRAC's Public Officer, Mr Michael McHugh, Patron, Mr Lindsay Lowe, Honorary Life Members Mr Jos Roberts and Dr Stephen Kane, all Club members, Professor Fred Watson AM, Head of Lighting and Environment, Australian Astronomical Observatory, President of the Tamworth Business Chamber, Mr Jye Segboer, Director Public Schools NSW Tamworth Network, NSW Department of Education, Ms Ruythe Dufty, the many businesses, organisations and residents across the local community and beyond for their enthusiastic and unanimous support for the Centre and the enormous amount of work put into this project, described by one observer as "one of the most worthy of community projects seen in the region in last twenty years".

"The Club would also like to sincerely thank the many people, businesses and organisations, too numerous to name here, who have already donated funds, telescopes and other equipment and offered in-kind and other assistance towards this exciting project," Mr Tschirpig said. "This fantastic community support, in conjunction with the Club's ongoing fundraising activities, will play a crucial role in helping to fit-out and complete the Centre and future donations will be gratefully received and acknowledged," he said.

We now look forward to work starting on the Centre, which is set to be an amazing tourism, educational and research facility within our community, and the opportunity of sharing the wonders of our universe with local residents and students as well as the many visitors the facility will attract to our region," Mr Tschirpig said.

Further information about the Astronomy and Science Education Centre and Planetarium, the Tamworth Regional Astronomy Club and ways of becoming involved and supporting this exciting community project, is available online at: www.tamwortheastronomy.com.au