

The University of Chicago
Yerkes Observatory

373 West Geneva Street
Williams Bay, WI 53191

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Mr. Douglas J. Sarno
The Perspectives Group
1055 N. Fairfax Street, Suite 204
Alexandria, VA 22314

Dear Doug:

We are delighted that you will be assisting the Yerkes Study Group in its collection and analysis of data. In this letter we will describe some of our expectations of where this work will lead. For completeness, we first give a brief background of the situation.

The University of Chicago has owned and operated the Yerkes Observatory in Williams Bay Wisconsin since it was founded in 1897. It has served for many years as an important research facility of the Department of Astronomy & Astrophysics. In recent years the Department has been exploiting larger telescopes in more favorable locations. Moreover, the laboratories needed for instrument assembly can be usefully consolidated on the main campus. Therefore, the University wishes to unburden itself of the operating and maintenance costs of the Yerkes Observatory, and it wishes to focus its research efforts on campus and at other locations. It also wishes to benefit from the value of the property.

At the same time, the Yerkes Observatory is an important part of the history of science in the United States. Its 40-inch telescope was once the world's largest and most powerful, and to this day it remains the world's largest lens-type telescope. The observatory is notable not only for its technical resources and innovations, but for the outstanding research done there or spawned from there. The observatory is also noted for the beauty of its architecture, of its surrounding grounds, and of the integrated landscape plan by John Charles Olmsted. It has become an icon for astronomy, and it is a noted site for landscape architecture. The park-like setting is an important attribute of the surrounding community. For these reasons, we must move forward with care so that historical stewardship can be properly addressed.

Three goals have been articulated by the University of Chicago: 1) to redirect its resources from Yerkes to support research on campus and elsewhere; 2) to do so while preserving the Observatory; 3) to do so with respect for relevant aspects of local community life.

A plan that would accomplish these goals is that Yerkes could be transformed from a research center into an education center. Such a future is natural since several educational programs are already underway. There are model institutions of similar sort that demonstrate long-term financial sustainability. The nation has an urgent need to train more students in science, engineering, math, and technology, and there are several options for funding sources. By creating such an institution, the preservation aspects may be automatically addressed. While this vision has these merits, we should consider any alternative good ideas that address the key objectives.

Concerning redirecting resources, an opportunity that has been widely discussed is that the parcel of land fronting on Geneva Lake has high commercial value. It has never been used for Observatory operations, and it is remote enough that development of that site would arguably have minor impact on the activities in the main building. If this land, and some other parcels whose redevelopment would not impede the use of the Observatory as an educational center, were sold for development, funds could flow to the Department of Astronomy & Astrophysics for its programs. However, some stake holders are of the opinion that revenues from land sales should contribute to an endowment to secure the future operations of the observatory.

It is evident that there are potentially many stake holders in the future of Yerkes Observatory: the administration of the University of Chicago (which currently supplies the operating funds); the Department of Astronomy & Astrophysics (which will benefit from a re-direction of resources); the Village of Williams Bay (which is sensitive to land use and preservation); the community of people invested in some way in Geneva Lake (environmental aspects, use of the lakefront, physical changes to the landscape); professional and amateur astronomers and historians of science and landscape architecture (historical aspects); and, of course, future beneficiaries of the educational programs we intend to establish.

It is inevitable that these interests are distinct, and that finding an acceptable compromise path will be complex and will take time. The Yerkes Study Group wishes to create a spirit of common cause. With your help we can enable these stake holders to participate in a meaningful way. In the end we all want to preserve the Observatory.

We would like to take advantage of your professional experience to help us gather important information from the stake holders and to help us with the analysis. In particular, we would like you to:

- identify the major stakeholders in the future of Yerkes Observatory
- identify their commonly held values and interests
- identify issues, concerns, and range of perspectives
- identify ideas for the nature of the best use of the facilities, including how it might be managed
- identify potential players who could contribute to the long-term financial stability of the maintenance of the facility and the programs conducted there.

Once these data have been gathered, we would like your assistance in the analysis aimed at finding the best plan for the future of Yerkes. The Yerkes Study Group is looking forward to working with you on this important task.

With best regards,

Richard Kron, Chair
For the Yerkes Study Group