

The Yerkes Study Group  
22 February 2007

## Background

A number of efforts have addressed the future use of the facilities (building, instruments, and property) of the University of Chicago's Yerkes Observatory. These have included proposals by Mirbeau and by Aurora University and assessments by three architectural firms commissioned by the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation.

There is widespread agreement that the best use of the Yerkes facility in the future is as a science education center; that the educational programs and all other expenses associated with the center need to be self-sustaining in the long run; and that the Yerkes building and telescope and considerable portions of the grounds are historically important and deserve to be preserved.

The studies undertaken so far have been largely concerned with options for land use and how the land use could fund the science center and generate resources to meet the University of Chicago's mission of cutting-edge research. However, it has become apparent that before a land-use plan can be completed, the constraints imposed by the activities of the science education center need to be understood.

In February of 2006 the faculty of the Department of Astronomy & Astrophysics produced a short report that sketched the general argument of why an education center was the most appropriate future mission for Yerkes, and it provided very preliminary minimal estimates of staffing and infrastructure costs. It also demonstrated that other models existed for historic research observatories that have been successfully transformed into education centers. The faculty report established a point of departure, but many issues remain to be worked out. Important developments since then need to be taken into account, principally including a major grant that enables direct involvement by several school districts in Walworth County, and the studies and recommendations by the architectural firms. Moreover the faculty report did not benefit from the input of the staff of the Observatory, potential institutional partners in the future Yerkes education center, and the community that would be affected by (and in principle benefit from) changes at the Observatory and the use of the surrounding land.

With these considerations in mind, the Department of Astronomy & Astrophysics wishes to take the next step by drafting, with the assistance and involvement of several other parties, a more detailed plan that can act as a substantive basis for choices in land-use options. The report is to be submitted to the Chair of the Department of Astronomy & Astrophysics by summer 2007.

The composition of the "Yerkes Study Group" (YSG) includes representatives from the Department of Astronomy & Astrophysics faculty; other neighboring university astronomy departments and laboratories; the Yerkes Observatory; Adler Planetarium; Aurora University; and the community surrounding the Observatory.

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Charge to Yerkes Study Group:

1. develop strategic goals for the Yerkes education center, and draft a mission statement that incorporates those goals.
2. develop possible management frameworks for how the center would work, including how a partnership of public and private entities would participate together in a non-profit organization. Who are the likely partners, and how can they be recruited? What are the criteria for partnership?
3. given the mission plan and a plan for how the center would be managed, what are the core physical attributes of the site that must be maintained in order to fulfill the mission?
4. develop a business model, or plan for a funding stream, that is adequate to support both the educational programs themselves, and also the general maintenance of the observatory infrastructure (buildings, instruments, and grounds). The business model should ensure a future that is self-sufficient over the long-term.
5. throughout the process of drafting the report, ensure that there is effective communication with the Board of Trustees of the Village of Williams Bay and its relevant committees.

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Residents of Williams Bay and others in the Geneva Lakes area have expertise and experience that will prove to be extremely valuable in the planning process. For example, there are a number of important environmental issues that need to be fully considered. The physical setting is iconic and has become part of the local community identity, and any changes to the setting need to be carefully vetted. Ideally the education mission will directly benefit the local area, both formally (via cooperative programs with local schools) and informally (via after-school activities and programs for adults). The YSG includes local representation to capture this expertise and enhance communications. In addition, the YSG will conduct open meetings with the community to obtain input.