



# Keeping an eye on the sky

## ■ *Astronomical society unveils new observatory*

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It's not the first public observatory in Alberta, but it is the first one assembled under dark skies, away from the light pollution of any major urban centre.

On Saturday, the Big Sky Astronomical Society held the grand opening of its observatory, a project that had been 10 years in the making.

Big Sky president James Durbano said that finally opening the Big Sky Observatory (BSO) was "absolutely wonderful — it's great. There's times I thought we wouldn't make it, but with perseverance, we got it done," he said.

Much of the opening ceremony was dedicated to acknowledging the volunteer help that was pivotal in making the project a reality.

Roughly 75 people showed up for the official ribbon cutting, but curious stargazers came and went throughout the night, making a tally of roughly 100 more accurate.

"Hopefully, it'll be a legacy for years to come," said Vulcan's Mayor Tom Grant during opening ceremonies, which were timed to end at sunset for the ribbon cutting.

Although a bit cloudy earlier that day, the BSO rolled off its roof to a clear night sky.

"We couldn't have asked for anything better," said Neel Roberts, Big Sky vice-president. It was rather cold, however, and Roberts said an extra 20 degrees would have been nice, but everyone came prepared for

chilly weather.

On a clear, moonless night, more than 1,000 stars can be spotted from the BSO's ideal space gazing vantage point, said a Big Sky news release.

"We want to make this into a learning centre," Roberts said. Astronomy and the science associated with it can be intimidating for newcomers, but with computers and GPS, anyone can learn, he said.

The telescope that is bolted down inside the BSO was donated by Dr. Karl Ivarson, who was unable to make it to the opening ceremonies.

But Durbano called him to share the news and asked all in attendance to shout a thank you out to Ivarson. Through Durbano, Ivarson said he hoped everyone enjoys the telescope.

The BSO is roughly 100 kilometres southeast of Calgary, or about 20 kilometres west of Champion.

It was originally built in sections and brought out to Twin Valley Dam for re-assembly.

"City dwellers should visit the observatory and see for themselves what they are missing," Durbano said.

And some did, including the Arnold family from Calgary. Brad and his wife Jayne made plans to attend the BSO's opening after hearing about it on the radio. The couple came out with their two young sons, Mac, 3, and Xzavier, 1.

"You can't expose them too early to stuff like this," said Brad, adding that a family night out doesn't have to mean spending plenty of cash at the movies.

"If you take a look, there's all kinds of wonderful things out there," said Jayne.

Now that the BSO is complete, plans are already in place to build a second observatory on the same site to house an even bigger



Simon Ducatel photo

Simon Baron of High River came out Saturday with his parents to take part in the grand opening of the Big Sky Astronomical Society's new observatory. The six-year-old takes a peak at Jupiter and her four moons through a bolted down telescope inside the Big Sky Observatory. For more photos, see page 11.

14-inch telescope that Big Sky has ready for use.

With 10,000 square feet of land leased from Alberta Environment, the Big Sky society has no shortage of space to build another observatory. "Hopefully that doesn't take another 10 years," said Durbano, laughing.

The official opening of the observatory was recently preceded by the society's 10th anniversary.

With its facility up and running, Big Sky plans to hold regular Saturday night stargazing events that will provide an opportunity for

visitors to learn more about the night sky, said the release.

These Saturday night sessions will begin next year, set to coincide in 2009 with the International Year of Astronomy, which is a UN initiative designed to rekindle world-wide interest in astronomy on the year marking the 400th anniversary of Galileo Galilei's first use of an astronomical telescope.

"We want to be part of this global celebration of astronomy, and our Saturday Night Stargazing will be one of our primary activities," Durbano said.