

## **Planets' building blocks enter Challenger Space**

**Date: October 12, 2006      Section(s): Columnists**

Paul Sipiara grinned as he gestured to the large, black-and-red-tinged mass sitting on a woolly green blanket.

Do not call it a rock. That 140-pound, approximately 12-inch diameter mass is a meteorite.

"Everybody gets them confused, the old shooting stars or falling stars," said Sipiara, a geologist and the president and chief executive of the Planetary Studies Foundation.

"Meteorites are the building blocks of planets."

Those building blocks will be on display starting Tuesday at the Challenger Learning Center for Science and Technology in Woodstock. The learning center, 222 Church St., has teamed with Sipiara's Planetary Studies Foundation to offer a new exhibit designed to educate space enthusiasts about meteorites.

"Our vision here is to become the educational center for McHenry County," Center Executive Director Steve Otten said.

"The credibility and the educational value [of] the planetary studies foundation is part of that mission, as well."

The new exhibit features samples from some of the more than 1,500 recognized meteorites the space foundation has obtained over the years.

With its close-up images of other planets, air photos of meteor strike sites, and memorabilia from the foundation's exploration trips to Antarctica, the exhibit melds nicely with the center's displays of space exploration and the planets that make up Earth's galactic neighborhood.

Sipiara said the two agencies formed a relationship about one year ago.

The Planetary Studies Foundation is dedicated to promoting earth and space science and education, as well as to serious scientific research. The Challenger Center is dedicated to fostering children's interest in math, science and technology through simulated scientific exploration.

The foundation's exhibit, which is located just off the Challenger Center's entrance foyer, will call the center home indefinitely.

"We're just tying in really nicely," Sipiara said. "From our point of view, we have a nice exhibit area, and Challenger has a new dimension to add to what they have to offer."

A ribbon-cutting ceremony Tuesday featuring veteran astronaut Ken Reightler, Jr., will begin at 6 p.m. at the center. Reightler also will give a presentation and host a question-

and-answer session. Public admission costs \$15.

“Some of these meteorites are absolutely phenomenal,” Sipiara said. “We hope somebody comes in, looks at a meteorite and gets hooked on it.”

**By Regan Foster**