Future 'Clearing' for IU Observatory

Brian McCoy

Indiana Daily Student

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Future ‘clearing’ for IU observatory

By Brian McCoy
Daily Student Staff Writer

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So bright, in fact, that Martin Burkhead, associate professor of astronomy, has commented, “We have a permanent moon outside the observatory.”

The “moon” — external light that hinders the observatory’s telescope — blocks the stars and is, in part, the result of the nearby law school expansion. The construction of a new wing has brought such an influx of internal and external lighting that it threatens to render the observatory completely useless.

But now — because of a compromise worked out between the law school, University Physical Facilities and the astronomy department — the only moon outside the observatory is a comforting 239,000 miles away.

The compromise calls for the installation within the observatory of a control to close the law school’s shades when the observatory is in use. A second control would turn off the external lights on the path around the observatory.

The ability to see the stars

Compromise ‘clears’ way for IU observatory

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There has been, among student groups like IUSA, a call for better lighting on campus. One result from this is a university policy to install more outdoor lights “as part of each new building project on campus,” said Terry Clapacs, Physical Facilities director.

The law addition, Clapacs said, was “a good opportunity to add lights and make that a safe walkway.”

Burkhead maintains the lights have done little to increase safety in the area.

“The lights aren’t doing anybody any good walking on the ground,” he said. “If they’re shining on the dome, they’re not shining on the ground.”

There are also smaller, waist-high lamps in the area and they too are hampering the observatory’s effectiveness.

To find a solution to the problem, meetings were held this spring at the observatory and a plan formalized.

Under the plan, a control to turn off the tall lights was installed in the observatory along with the control for the law school shades. It will enable the observatory to extinguish the lights whenever the telescope is being used.

The moving and installing of the mechanisms cost $1,400 and both should be operational “by the first of July,” said Joe True, architect and director of operations, University Physical Facilities.