

SOLAR SYSTEM DYNAMICIST TO TALK ABOUT THE REEVALUATION OF PLUTO

JAMESTOWN – “Is Pluto a planet?”

Or has our traditional view of Pluto been wrong for many years?

Dr. Harold F. Levison of the Southwest Research Institute in Boulder, CO, will shed more light on Pluto’s status during his Astronomy Day Lecture at 7:30 p.m. Friday, Oct. 2, at Koury Hospitality Careers Center auditorium at Guilford Technical Community College.

The lecture commemorates the fall opening of the Cline Observatory located on GTCC’s Jamestown campus. The event is open to the public free of charge.

After Levison’s presentation, Cline Observatory will be open for telescopic viewing of the moon, Jupiter and other heavenly highlights, weather permitting.

Levison’s visit is made possible by the GTCC Foundation, and the lecture is part of Cline Observatory’s International Year of Astronomy speaker series. This year marks the 400th anniversary of Galileo’s construction of his first telescopes. Astronomers around the world are holding special IYA events throughout 2009 to celebrate the anniversary.

Levison, a noted solar system dynamicist who specializes in the outer solar system and formation of planets, will speak on “What Planets Are and How They Form.”

Tom English, observatory director, said, “The question about how to properly classify Pluto -- planet or not -- has been much-discussed over the past decade or two, and Dr. Levison has been involved in many of the discussions. The issue centers on how to properly define what a planet actually is -- should we consider only physical properties like structure and composition, or are dynamical properties, such as motion and gravitational influence also important?”

Levison will offer his views regarding Pluto’s status. “Is Pluto a planet?” he will ask.

“This question has been on the mind of both professional and interested laymen for the last decade,” he said. “This debate came to a head in 2005 with the discovery of Eris, a Kuiper Belt object larger than Pluto,” Levison added. The Kuiper Belt is a group of icy asteroids beyond the orbit of Neptune.

He plans to describe the history of the debate about Pluto and show why discovery of the Kuiper belt has led to the reevaluation of Pluto’s status. “I will put Pluto in context by discussing our current ideas about planet formation and the evolution of planetary systems as a whole,” he said.

Levison’s principal research interests lie in the area of the dynamics of astronomical objects. In particular, he focuses on the formation and long-term behavior of the solar system bodies. Levison’s work includes studies of the long-term dynamical behavior of comets, the dynamics of objects in the Kuiper belt, the origin and stability of Trojan asteroids, and the formation of planets.

His web page describes his work: Dr. Levison’s principal research interests lie in the area of the dynamics of astronomical objects. In particular, he focuses on the formation and long-term behavior of the solar system bodies. Dr. Levison’s work includes studies of the long-term dynamical behavior of comets, the dynamics of objects in the Kuiper belt, the origin and stability of Trojan asteroids, and the formation of planets.

For more information, contact Tom English at trenghish@gtcc.edu or 336-334-4822, Ext. 2620.

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