

NOVAC PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2023

Introduction:

This report is compiled from inputs collected across the spectrum of NOVAC operations. It provides a summary of club operations, strategic direction, and the challenges and opportunities experienced during the 2023 calendar year. This report also provides a baseline from which the 2024 Board of Directors may consider in managing club affairs.

Executive Summary:

During 2023 NOVAC continued its pattern of providing high-quality astronomy experiences, education and outreach serving its members and public alike. The club enjoys a healthy financial position with a strong cash position in reserve. Membership levels at the end of 2023 were slightly higher than in 2022.

The club continued its practice of holding as many in-person general meetings as possible on a monthly basis at George Mason University. The practice of providing a live streaming experience, initiated in 2022, was continued for all general meetings with success. I would anticipate both formats (in-person and streaming) to continue for the foreseeable future. Overall general meeting attendance was improved given the dual format and flexibility offered by both delivery methods. Four of twelve general meetings featured a NOVAC member as the keynote speaker, a practice that I believe should continue given the depth of experience within our membership base and the ability to collaborate from within.

NOVAC also supported its traditional club-initiated astronomy star parties - Astronomy Day and Star Gaze, as well as provided the main planning effort for the Night Owl Star Party and Almost Heaven Star Party (AHSP). This was the second straight year for AHSP following a pause beginning in 2020 due to covid restrictions. Both events were amazing experiences for those attending and sold out quickly.

Significant progress was made in transforming the club's IT infrastructure, using all volunteer IT help. In early 2024, the NOVAC web site and our membership management database will transition from a mixture of deprecated hardware and software to a more commonly used SaaS (software as a solution) baseline. Continued improvement of key NOVAC IT functionality should continue in 2024 following the transition of these core elements.

SUMMARY BY FUNCTION:

Board of Directors:

The NOVAC Board of Directors (BoD) met monthly during 2023 with the exception of July and December. BoD meeting minutes can be found in the club's shared drives but will likely be posted in a more widely available location in 2024. Significant board activities and decisions in 2023 included:

- Promoted a strong community outreach program to include support for schools, local civic groups, scouts, and requests from Meadowkirk, Wolf Trap events, George Mason University, the Udvar-Hazy center, Astronomy on the Mall, and numerous other organizations
- Decided on IT improvement plan/approach and empowered IT team to transition web and membership functions to a more sustainable architecture; work will continue in 2024
- Facilitated improving information content on public-facing and member-only web pages; updated member only pages to be more current and consistent with membership and club operations
- Supported local high school science fair with judges and NOVAC-provided awards
- Continued active loaner program with selective acceptance of donations and procurement of new items that fit with the club's objectives and member interests
- Continued astronomy-based electronic library service for members to use through Overdrive; supported book giveaways throughout the year to reduce inventory of physical library assets; will likely continue on path to liquidate remaining physical library assets given storage and distribution challenges and infrequent member use
- Supported open house and ribbon-cutting for the Blue Ridge Center for Environmental Stewardship (BRCES), now Sweet Run State Park; established good working relationship with park personnel
- Continued ongoing relationships with existing observing sites and park personnel
- Planned members-only observing event at Camp Highroad to help new-members or beginners with more dedicated mentoring opportunity in the field
- Sponsored observing challenges for NOVAC members striving to stimulate interest, activity, and friendly competition within the club
- Initiated a special interest group dedicated to understanding and sharing insights on the two solar eclipses occurring in 2023 and 2024
- Initiated non-traditional, daytime/solar outreach at two Virginia wineries; marketed interest in the two solar eclipses as well as NOVAC; well received with agreements from both venues to continue
- Implemented process including membership vote to adopt change to NOVAC bylaws
- Initiated charitable donations for Clear Dark Sky and for George Mason Friends of the Observatory

Thanks to our Board members for all they did not only in their positions of leadership but also stepping up to take on additional duties as needs arise. They have generously given many hundreds of hours to NOVAC and collectively enabled many of the things we all enjoy as members of the club. Thanks to officers Alan Goldberg (VP), Marcy Crane (Secretary), Tommy Domingue (Treasurer), and Directors Woody Davis, Thomas Frazier, Christopher Spain, Sandeep Jain, and Kandi Mitchell.

Membership:

As of December 26, 2023 the club had 918 regular members and 273 household members. This is an increase from the previous year and is evidence of a continued strong interest in astronomy and NOVAC in particular. Membership renewals from new members remains stubborn at about 50%, meaning half of new members do not renew for the following year. While cause is uncertain many new members expressed limits on their time and other demands that prevented more active involvement. This may be a contributor. Joining NOVAC is also inexpensive and without any requirements so many members may be willing to try it out for a time, but decline in subsequent years. Once IT is transitioned an auto-renew feature will be established making it less likely that memberships will lapse due to non-attention.

Finance:

NOVAC's financial position is more than adequate to fund ongoing operations with significant reserves to handle unplanned contingencies, additional programs, or new initiatives future boards may elect to pursue. Our assets include \$58,996 in our checking account as of Nov 30 2023, and \$100,100 in our savings account. The club has no debt. The savings account is set up for supporting any unexpected expenses that may come up. We received a donation from MITRE Corporation of \$5,000 in support of the club's initiatives for the eclipses (2023 and 2024) The board spent \$3,002 of this donation on eclipse glasses and \$2,783 on loaner scope program which benefits NOVAC well beyond the eclipse timeframes.

Additional club donations included generous club members who elected to donate additional funds (\$370) Member Sponsors (\$2,405) and Member Patrons (\$2,405) with new and renewing memberships. Other donations included matching funds from members' employers, and directly from corporations we do business with from Amazon (\$228), PayPal (\$36), Disney (\$660), and the Hovatter PTA (\$250). Several items of equipment were donated to the club that were not considered suitable for the loaner program, so were offered to members with the proceeds converted to cash donations. In 2023 - as in prior years - the dues collected from members covered all of the club's activities and administrative expenses.

Outreach:

Public outreach on astronomy and night sky preservation continues to be a hallmark of NOVAC's mission. In addition to our regularly scheduled events at Crockett Park, Sky

Meadows, and Udvar-Hazy Center, we accommodated more than 30 other requests from schools, universities, libraries, scout troops, and public parks in Northern Virginia including Wolf Trap and Shenandoah National Park. This year we struggled at times to find willing and enthusiastic volunteers to fulfill all requests. We receive many requests for school and scout presentations and those seem to be where we need the most assistance. We do have a base set of tailorable slides available for members who may be interested in working with children and giving short presentations. Outreach is a core function of our club and an area always in need of volunteers. Our main outreach events at Sky Meadows and Udvar Hazy have seen record-setting attendance numbers this year. Many families with young children attend these events and that trend is likely to continue in 2024. Many thanks to Kandi Mitchell and Tom Frazier as our co-leads in outreach. They've done an amazing job orchestrating nearly all of our public events and ensuring we have sufficient volunteers to make each event successful.

General Meetings:

In 2023 the club continued the practice of holding dual formats for all general meetings: in-person at GMU and live-stream via Google meet. This format is likely to be continued as long as physical space is available (currently GMU). Offering both formats is likely to result in the highest overall attendance as some members definitely prefer one method over the other. The room used at GMU was adequately-sized for all meetings held in 2023, but room size may become an issue if further growth is seen here. GMU personnel were always accommodating for entry, access, and A/V setup but the club is dependent on that help to execute these meetings.

On two occasions the GMU observatory was opened after the general meeting and viewing through the school's 32" telescope was made available – a real treat for those attending. We certainly thank the department and students for making that possible. The Astronomy Department at GMU continues to be a great local partner for NOVAC thanks to help from Dr. Peter Plavchan and Dr. Robert Parks and to the Friends of the Observatory student volunteers. Special thanks as well to George Doschek who has helped us find quality speakers each month. George manages most of the communication and coordination required to secure those speakers for our club. Thank you George!

Science Fair support:

NOVAC supported judging for the Fairfax Regional Science & Engineering Fair in 2023. This was the first time in four years that students representing more than 300 projects gathered in person at Robinson Secondary School in Fairfax on March 18 for the Fairfax Regional Science and Engineering Fair. The NOVAC judges picked three winning projects relating to Astronomy and one honorable mention. Recipients received printed certificates and gift cards from NOVAC.

This activity continues to be a great way to involve NOVAC in both a community activity and one that directly impacts students with potential science-minded careers ahead of them. There

tends to be very few astronomy-related projects overall mostly given the emphasis on other science curriculum taught in secondary schools. NOVAC is one of the few outside organizations that offers tangible rewards to students for noteworthy projects related to our club's interest. An opportunity exists here to try and find a method of communicating NOVAC's purpose and willingness to contribute to science fair to schools and students early in the school year when project selection can be influenced. Thanks to Tom Frazier for leading this effort and to our NOVAC judges: Charles Murphy, Kevin Black, Harlan Loomis, Carol Maxwell, and John Birch.

Observing sites (listed alphabetically):

Blue Ridge Center for Environmental Stewardship (BRCES)/Sweet Run State Park (SRSP):

NOVAC continued the relationship with BRCES (private site) in 2023, and saw it officially become Virginia's new Sweet Run State Park during the year. The missions of SRSP and NOVAC overlap, both desiring to educate the public about natural resources and preserve the environment, in NOVAC's case, the night sky. SRSP is approximately twenty miles northwest of Leesburg, VA. The site offers good road access, may appeal to those members along the Hwy 7 corridor in Virginia and offers good observing horizons and cleared areas for observing. NOVAC supported two public observing nights this year at the park. Both were very pleasant, low-key events with about 20-30 attendees. Now that the park has had its formal dedication and reached a basic level of regular staffing, we hope to offer more such activities in 2024. NOVAC will also have an opportunity to participate in long-term planning at the park, which should help ensure that astronomy activities are considered in conjunction with new building, lighting and other aspects of park development going forward. Many thanks to Jim Crowley our Sweet Run NOVAC coordinator and Alan Goldberg for all the help both this year and in 2022 establishing our partnership with Sweet Run and enabling our members to enjoy this newest observing site.

A reminder that NOVAC members who have become official State Park Volunteers, including those who volunteer at Sky Meadows State Park, are also eligible to observe anytime at Sweet Run State Park. The gate codes are the same at both Parks. The preferred night time observing site at Sweet Run is the Sawmill Lane area, indicated on the NOVAC observing site webpage. Observers should re-lock the gate when leaving and sign the logbook that is maintained at the site kiosk.

Camp Highroad (CHR):

CHR continues to be a valuable site that should be more frequently used by NOVAC members than it currently is. NOVAC continues to pay for port-a-john facilities on site. In July of this year, NOVAC set up two NOVAC-only observing opportunities at CHR. Weather was rather uncooperative for both events, but site conditions were excellent thanks to all the preparation by Tom Finkenbinder, our NOVAC site lead. BoD in 2024 should consider additional opportunities

to conduct public outreach at CHR or use the site to promote NOVAC-only observing opportunities.

C.M. Crockett Park:

Crockett Park, south of Manassas, continues to be a popular observing location for NOVAC. Park management is very accommodating in offering flexible observing opportunities for NOVAC members in exchange for club-hosted monthly public observing sessions and two large, annual observing events: Astronomy Day and Star Gaze. Both Astronomy Day and Star Gaze were held in 2023, attracting over 200 people each, providing an excellent opportunity to conduct public awareness for astronomy and night sky preservation. Since 2020, the club's operating concept for these events has been to focus on observing and field activities. Small exhibits and short talks or demonstrations were also conducted by members.

Some members have expressed desire to return to the format used prior to the COVID-19 restrictions where a larger banquet tent is rented and speakers from academia or professional circles are invited to give talks. If implemented, this format would likely preclude the ability to offer a convenient rain date for these events and would impose significantly more cost and logistic planning for both events. It is a consideration though if sufficient active volunteers were willing to organize and execute the required planning and logistics.

Thanks to Laird Taylor, our NOVAC Crockett Park lead volunteer. Laird helped us form a great relationship with park manager Craig Johnson and opportunities to observe at Crockett remain excellent with great flexibility offered to NOVAC.

Meadowkirk (MK):

NOVAC supported four outreach events at MK in 2023. MK provides a unique opportunity for smaller, but very engaging outreach opportunities. The site also provides a very accommodating member observing location in the Middleburg, VA area. Some NOVAC members also facilitated with maintenance and operation of MK's observatory and its 12" Meade telescope. This could become a special project for members interested in assisting MK with upgrades to the observatory. An informal assessment of their Briton Observatory with suggested improvements was offered by NOVAC. The observatory and telescope are not NOVAC property however. MK management has expressed their appreciation for NOVAC many times. They acknowledge the unique value we bring in astronomy outreach to their guests and very much want to continue our partnership.

Sky Meadows:

Sky Meadows (SM) continues to be the highest attended public outreach venue and preferred observing site for NOVAC members. Nearly 3000 members of the public were served here this year alone! This is largely attributed to the excellent relationship with Sky Meadows staff, the

Astronomy for Everyone Program (which is held rain or shine), great observing conditions and property setting – and most importantly, the NOVAC volunteers that contribute their time and energies to make this a superb site. SM provides many other activities (hiking, camping, picnicking, etc.) for the public to enjoy in addition to star-gazing. Outreach and personal observation at SM significantly contributed to record-setting park attendance in 2023. Huge thanks to Woody Davis and Paul Derby for shaping the relationship at SM. This site alone has really transformed our public outreach and club member’s enjoyment of the hobby.

Spruce Knob Mountain Center (SKMC):

SKMC and Experienced Learning continued to host The Almost Heaven Star Party (AHSP) in 2023. The event was amazing and the nearly four nights of good clear weather was unprecedented. This was the second year where AHSP registration, payment collection, meals, and facility support were handled by Experienced Learning, not NOVAC. This reduced the burden on club volunteers and eliminated the bookkeeping for the “pass through” payments previously collected by NOVAC. In 2023, we continued the previous year’s practice of having virtual speaker sessions ahead of the event itself, and added a return to the practice of having live speaking events at AHSP itself. This was enabled by fully lifting the COVID-19 restrictions. The completion of the second yurt at SKMC also helped by affording a much larger and more comfortable seating arrangement for attendees. As with prior years, local tours and day events were as planned by NOVAC and EL, offering nice day-time options for attendees. AHSP is a premier star party with attendees from across the country. All of the astronomy programs, the coordination, daily scheduling, web site, and so many other details are handled by our NOVAC committee led by Sean Matthews with help from Chris Lee, Dan Ward, George Doschek, Jeff Ball, Zack Panitzke, Wade Hampton, Marty Bordelon, Bob Fini, Rebecca Sampson, Steve Phillips, Terry Cabell, Chris Nowland, Alex Gorbachev, and Skip Bird.

The Night Owl Star Party was also held at SKMC in 2023. This was conceived during the COVID-19 period as an “observing only” replacement for AHSP while under public health restrictions. The registration for this event is again handled by EL. In 2024, NOSP and AHSP are both planned again, May 9-13 and Aug 30-Sep 3, respectively.

In addition to AHSP and NOSP, NOVAC continued to provide (and fund) opportunities for individual member camping and observing at no cost to the member. This year, the weather unfortunately did not cooperate for most of these monthly opportunities. Of six sessions, only one had decent observing weather. For that month’s camping however, fifteen NOVAC members signed up and took advantage of the camping and observing experience. A total of 31 different members made camping or dorm reservations for the other five monthly sessions.

We also improved the language in this observing agreement with EL to state a “limited” number of camping spots would be available. Last year’s agreement was more specific at limited us to

four camping spots. This change in language allowed us to surge when the member demand was there (as it was in June).

The liability forms for 2023 were simplified and no longer required members to provide health insurance information. Another change made was in the reservation process for these camping spots. A more accurate and realistic approach was to accept reservations two months in advance versus at any time. This improved our accounting and communication with EL and helped us serve NOVAC members better through a more accurate process. SKMC is usually quite accommodating to NOVAC and our relationship with EL remains solid. Many thanks to our site coordinator, Tom Semrov for his years of volunteer service and for all the positive changes made this year to the overall camping experience for our members.

Loaner Scope Program:

The loaner scope program remains one of the best offerings the club can make to any member seeking to try out new equipment before purchasing something on their own. It also helps beginners progress from simple to more complicated setups, all available through the loaner program. However, as was the case in 2022, the loaner program's use in 2023 is at a lower level than its recent peak in 2020/early 2021. The peak is roughly aligned with most of the COVID-19 restrictions when supply chains were strained and long lead times for purchases by members were the norm. Those days seem to be mostly behind us.

In 2023 we acquired a newer ZWO ASI585MC color camera and two Quark HA Chromosphere eyepieces to fuel an interest in astrophotography and solar outreach. In 2024, the club intends to acquire a Seestar telescope/camera combo to encourage members to "try" before "buy" as well as share the loan with an expected participation in outreach. Also, in 2024 we plan to upgrade several of the computerized "push to" Dobsonians to newer versions, primarily because Orion has discontinued all support for the Intelliscope line, of which we have five. We have one Intelliscope "G" model that is no longer usable with the "go to" function and parts are not available to repair.

We will order a Sky-Watcher 10" Flextube 250P SynScan GoTo Collapsible Dobsonian to test and may order a second one if it proves a worthy successor. It will also have the advantage of being easier to transport. Bob Parks has been our loaner scope coordinator for many years and continues to shoulder the burden of managing this resource and handling all the equipment details, from assessing donation opportunities to procuring new loaner items or repairing existing items. The loaner program is an area we sorely need additional volunteer help in 2024 if we are to continue offering such a terrific benefit to our membership.

2024 will likely see changes in the loaner scope web-based software. An interim pathway to an improved software baseline will be to manage loans and requests more directly from requester to custodian (email, phone, text).

Many thanks go out Bob Parks for all his service to NOVAC over many years and to our loaner scope custodians who manage individual loaner items and offer the space to house them.

IT improvements:

NOVAC is on a path to transition to a SaaS (software as a solution) approach using WordPress Engine as the foundation. Member database content is planned to transition from an Oracle-based standalone database to Member Press, a specific member-management solution that interfaces with Wordpress directly. Transitioning these two elements of IT will enable the club to lessen its dependency on deprecated hardware and software and begin to see modernization in key areas of IT. Significant progress has been made integrating these elements and ensuring the finance and membership relationships are preserved. Additional functionality in the way of user profiles and forms and calendars were added and will allow greater flexibility in tracking membership going forward and making it easier to record and track calendar events. I anticipate transitioning many of these elements in early 2024. Additional IT improvements can then follow by addressing listserve functionality and other items noted by our membership as needing update. Thanks to Zack Panitzke, Mark Firoozfar, and Tommy Domingue for their dedication in seeing us through the many choices and hurdles presented by trying to transform a complicated IT system. It is no simple task especially using volunteers only. There are many technical and programmatic choices to be made, each with its own set of risks and unknowns and opinions one way or the other on the merits of any solution set. Zack and Mark have done an amazing job moving the club to a solution that should be simpler to maintain, reduces our club's dependency on antiquated products, and will open up some new features the club can leverage across many of our functional areas. Thanks as well to Tommy who made sure we could integrate the new membership components with our finance and payment systems. I really look forward to seeing great results from all this work as we transition the first of these new components in 2024.

Mentor Program:

NOVAC's mentor program continues on a "by request" feature of membership. This is an area that will benefit from the transition of the NOVAC web site which will allow more robust member profiles to be established allowing better methods for linking requests to potential mentors. Thanks to John McDonnell for his work in helping maintain this program and for linking those that need help with those that can provide it!

Special Interest Groups (SIGs):

The primary purpose of SIGs is to promote the enjoyment of specialized topics related to astronomy. It enables members to communicate in smaller groups than NOVAC as a whole and

enables more independent actions to be set by those leading the SIGs. The SIGs are considered a significant benefit to membership as the network of sub-members provides an invaluable source of information and camaraderie while enjoying a niche interest within the larger hobby. It can also be a source of motivated members to contribute to the larger NOVAC mission as volunteer leaders. Like all NOVAC activities the SIGs are only as active and rewarding as volunteers are willing to make them. We could use some new members willing to energize some of these groups! Separate web pages and automated membership could be considered for renewed interest in promoting SIGs activity. In 2024, NOVAC's primary SIGs include, Byron Bergert Imaging, Astro-Travelers, 3D printing, and Solar Eclipse SIGs. Other SIGs do exist as mail-group listings as well, including one centered on EAA (Electronic-Assisted Astronomy).

Byron Bergert Imaging SIG:

The imaging SIG, led by Kevin Quin, is one of NOVAC's best success stories with plenty of membership in the SIG as well as frequent sessions featuring a variety of guest speakers (some club members, some not). As the modernization of IT continues in 2024 a web presence for this SIG (and others) should be included on the member's portal. Thanks Kevin and all the contributors to this SIG for all your work. Astro-imaging is an area so many members have interest in and this SIG is helping everyone improve their skills by learning and collaborating with other members - exactly what all these SIGs are all designed to accomplish!

Astro-Traveler's SIG:

This SIG was initiated in 2021 with the primary emphasis of traveling to experience astronomy sites, activities, and observing events. Travel would include local site visits, new places to observe, and possibly just member get-togethers, but could also include planning more extravagant adventures. Those might include other astronomy club events, travel to eclipses and other venues. The primary benefit to NOVAC is connecting people in smaller groups that share similar interests all under the astronomy umbrella.

3D Print SIG:

This SIG was initiated to bring together those individuals that share a common interest in astronomy with an eye toward the do-it-yourself manufacturing via 3D printing. A secondary goal of this SIG is to eventually provide a routine means where any NOVAC member may request a part be manufactured as might be needed for their particular need. Thanks Dave Baxter, our 3D print SIG lead! Let's find some new opportunities in 2024!

Solar Eclipse SIG:

This SIG was established by Alan Goldberg as a forum to encourage information sharing and education related to the two near-term solar eclipse events. The SIG has amassed considerable materials and video presentations that can be accessed in preparation for the

April 2024 eclipse. Thanks to both Alan and Pamela DeSmidt for organizing and maintaining this SIG. It has attracted a large following, provides very timely and unique information to our membership, and is so well organized and planned. This is a real treasure-trove as we approach the eclipse in April 2024.

NASA Night Sky Network:

NOVAC continued the relationship with the NASA Night Sky Network (NSN). One of the primary benefits offered by NSN is providing materials that can be downloaded, printed and used to support club outreach. They also provide a web presence for clubs that are not large enough or able to have their own website. NSN also has plenty of educational webinars provided by notable speakers in the astronomy field. These provide a nice complement to our NOVAC speakers and promoting those events on NOVAC.com has been a way to add content to our website as well. NOVAC continues to get outreach inquiries and some informational queries through the NSN. We may receive new members through this linkage, but it is a difficult metric to track. We also have limited means to determine how our members may use the NSN and its various resources. Julie Aamoht has been our NSN lead for the past three years. She has really elevated our relationship with NSN by bringing some of their content forward to NOVAC and relaying some of our club's success to NSN. Julie has offered some additional opportunities (listed below) to consider for 2024 regarding our relationship with NSN. Thanks Julie!

- Ensure we provide maximum visibility to the NSN speaker series and virtual seminars. This could take the form of more information on our website directly or through announcements. We could also provide additional short, special topics on NSN throughout the year.
- Develop a list of the NSN solar system ambassadors as a reference. Those that are also NOVAC members would allow us to build a small core group of individuals that could be used for giving short talks at outreach events.
- Take advantage of the volunteer award pins currently being offered by NSN for use by clubs. NSN has made this easy.
- Become a "featured club" by submitting more in-depth write-ups of our club's events on a regular basis. Everything we do takes a volunteer with some eager momentum, but if one can be found to champion this initiative it may provide more exposure to our club within the NSN framework.

Astronomical League support:

NOVAC member participation in observing challenges did see an uptick in interest this year, although this remains largely an untapped opportunity for new members or even experienced ones looking for well-structured observing lists and challenges. NOVAC has tried to encourage participation through club contests or internal challenges, but those mostly did not attract member interest or participation despite modest prize and recognition offerings. NOVAC 2024 strategy should consider new ways to provide member observing challenges as a way to help

new members in learning, encourage camaraderie amongst more seasoned members seeking to achieve similar observing goals and results. Thanks to Brad Payne for the past several years of managing our relationship with AL. Brad has also helped spur interest in having all members, but particularly new members, participate in some of the observing challenges offered by AL. This is a great way to improve one's observing skills or get acquainted with the night sky. AL membership is a benefit of NOVAC membership, so all regular NOVAC members receive the AL magazine *Reflector*, and can benefit from the AL recognition programs.

NOVAC Library

2023 saw continuation of the electronic library, providing an astronomy-related lending library available to all members free of charge. This library allows for the electronic check-out of books and other astronomy-related materials for a thirty-day period at a time. The service we have opted for is one managed by Overdrive, the same electronic library system in use by many traditional libraries today. There are over 100 books/periodicals that can be checked-out – a great resource for the club.

In 2023 NOVAC continued to operate, although at a very much reduced rate, our physical library of books and other materials. Members can still check out materials by contacting the club's librarian. In 2024 however we will likely discontinue offering the physical library materials and will likely donate the existing materials to members or to local libraries. The challenges of finding a suitable, permanent, and most importantly, accessible storage location for roughly 25 boxes of books and materials has just not materialized. These materials, unlike electronic media, become dated and infrequently accessed over time. It is time to move away from the printed materials.

Many thanks to Chris Spain for managing NOVAC's library - digital and hardcopy both. Chris has personally stored much of the club's collection in his own space given there was no other suitable storage available to the club. He's made personal book deliveries to members as well - above and beyond support!

International Dark Sky Association (IDA):

NOVAC continued its long-standing partnership with IDA, now rebranded as DarkSky International. NOVAC supported dark sky focused outreach at George Mason's Space Day with several hundred guests in attendance. NOVAC also facilitated dark sky conversations with the Sweet Run State Park officials. We are so fortunate to have Tom Reinert, president of the DarkSky International as a club member. He has been a keynote speaker at one of our monthly meetings and is a frequent volunteer for many of our public observing sessions. Eileen Kragie is also a top-notch volunteer for NOVAC and shares a passion for dark sky preservation. NOVAC is so fortunate to have enthusiastic and dedicated members championing dark sky preservation. Thanks Tom and Eileen.

A side note is offered here to explain NOVAC's stance on direct intervention regarding what seems to be the continued erosion of our night skies due to ongoing and new commercial and residential development throughout our region. This question comes up a few times a year. As a reminder, NOVAC as a corporation is neither a taxpayer nor property owner in any jurisdiction. We therefore have minimal to no leverage as an organization to influence ongoing or planned developments. NOVAC's position on increasing light pollution is to inform members of such issues as they arise or as we become aware of them, so that individuals may engage on their own or advocate for change as they may personally choose. NOVAC's role in dark sky advocacy is that of a support organization, principally as a supporter of DarkSky International or other similar nonprofits and their chapters.

Charitable donations:

In 2023, NOVAC provided a \$200 donation to Clear Dark Sky for the continuation of this valuable resource, and to ensure the presence of NOVAC observing sites within their weather-related app. NOVAC provided a \$1000 donation to GMU to support the Fairfax observatory, to support student-led astronomy initiatives, and to support cooperative activities with NOVAC. NOVAC also supplied prizes in the form of gift cards to students offering astronomy-related projects as part of the regional science fair.

Summary & Opportunities:

NOVAC enjoyed a successful 2023 highlighted by a strong year of successful public outreach, all with increasing levels of attendance and number of requests. The club continues to enjoy a strong membership base and with a solid financial balance sheet to support all operations. The club is fortunate to have many dedicated members with many years of experience in leading our activities. The challenge is finding those new members and new volunteers willing to share the load and be a lead or coordinator for such efforts. We need to find ways to broaden the volunteer base and encourage new members or the inactive ones to help us succeed, meet ongoing demand for outreach, and find new and interesting activities for the club.

We welcomed the addition of the Sweet Run State Park as a new observing site in 2023 and enjoyed another year of great partnerships at all of our other observing sites.

Opportunities for renewed focus in 2024 should include:

- Complete transition of the web site and membership from a server-based, standalone system to a more modern foundation using cloud-based common products
- Continue the modernization of IT by addressing limitations with the listserve mail service, SIG membership, and loaner program software
- Motivate members to become new NOVAC volunteers to help lead key club functions

- Improve the quality of NOVAC’s web content by supporting and further developing the team producing NOVAC website content
- Maximize use of existing observing site locations, especially under-utilized ones such as Camp Highroad
- Re-energize the special interest groups to create new opportunities for members and encourage new volunteers to become involved

Thanks to all our members, our board of directors, appointed coordinators, and most especially all of the volunteers that chipped in to make us successful in 2023. Together we shared astronomy and an understanding of the night sky and our place in the universe to thousands – not only here in the DMV, but across the country.

I personally thank you for the opportunity to lead the club as president this year and for the previous two years. I have so appreciated the help from our volunteer-base to carry out all the activities we’ve engaged in this year. It is far more rewarding to say “yes” to an outreach request than to decline for lack of interest. Our volunteers made that achievable, often several times each week! The opportunity to do more, or find more activities that appeal to club members is always present. I would simply encourage new members or those on the sidelines to get involved. It doesn’t take much experience or any special astronomy knowledge to make a huge difference in our club’s success. While I am stepping down from my role in 2024 our club’s future is bright and the skies are clear ahead!

See you under the stars,

Paul Severance
President, Northern Virginia Astronomy Club