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Jay Calderon/DN

Members of Theta Xi Fraternity celebrate a first-half touchdown by the Pittsburgh Steelers Sunday during Super Bowl XXX. The Steelers went on to lose to the Dallas Cowboys 27-17.

Human beings finally discovering the answers to cosmic questions

By Lynda Williams
Staff Reporter

News Analysis

The universe has changed — at least the way humans understand it scientifically. Two discoveries that revolutionize our understanding of the universe were announced at the American Astronomical Society's annual meeting this month.

Astronomers turned the Hubble space telescope's big eye on a thin slice of deep space, took a galaxy count and found a lot more galaxies than expected. If that slice is a representative sample, then there are about 50 billion galaxies — 40 billion more than previously estimated.

Many theories in cosmology and astrophysics depend on the number of galaxies and thus the amount of matter in the universe. In fact, a "missing matter" problem has inspired the notion of "dark matter" — planetoids and particles so dark or weak that we cannot detect them. This discovery will certainly shed some light on the missing matter problem.

The discovery of two planets in our Milky Way Galaxy also makes an impact of cosmic proportions. Although most astronomers believe that planets exist outside our solar system, none have been found.

Until this month.

Astronomers Geoff Marcy and Paul Butler, of San Francisco State Univer-

sity and the University of California in Berkeley, have been searching the Milky Way for planets for nearly a decade.

By measuring the amount of wobble in a star's light, they can infer whether there is a planetary companion orbiting it.

Although for years they did not find any likely candidates, they developed the most accurate techniques in the world for measuring stellar wobble.

When a team of Swiss astronomers announced last October that they had found a planet in the constellation Pegasus, Marcy and Butler turned their telescope toward it and saw the stellar wobble confirming the planet's existence.

Perhaps even more exciting was the news that the two planets orbiting stars in the constellations Ursa Major (the Big Dipper) and Virgo have climates that are potentially suitable for some kind of biological life form. But because it is impossible to see the planets themselves due to the bright light of the stars they orbit, it will be difficult to verify these possibilities.

The missing matter problem concerns the very fate of the universe. According to Albert Einstein's Gen-

eral Theory of Relativity, matter warps the structure of space-time — that is, it produces a geometry or shape that the universe moves in as it expands in time. If we know how much matter there is in the universe, then we can predict this geometry.

With too much matter, the universe will have a "closed" geometry — one that will eventually collapse in a "Big Crunch." If there's not enough matter, the universe will expand forever in an "open" geometry. But just the right amount of matter means that the universe will come to a halt in what is called a "flat" geometry.

Up until last week, observational estimates on the amount of matter in the universe seemed to have indicated an open geometry. Cosmological theories of the universe, however, predict a flat geometry. This is a serious discrepancy between theory and observation that has resulted in the missing matter problem. Being able to determine the amount of matter that galaxies contribute to the total mass of the universe will help in the resolution of this discrepancy.

Although these findings may seem out of touch with the daily grind, humans always have looked to the stars and wondered, "What's out there? Where are we going?" With these discoveries, we got a little closer to answering those cosmic questions.

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Camps

Continued from Page 1

Clarke said that six months would not be the maximum sentence, but he did not want to see extremely lengthy stays in the program.

"Keeping them in there for a year or so would defeat the purpose," Clarke said.

Currently 27 states, eight counties, one city and the Federal Prison System have similar work camp programs.

Nelson said his proposed camp would not model itself after one particular program.

"We have studied many of the best ideas from similar camps in other states," he said. "We believe that LB1171 contains the most successful elements from programs across the country."

Costs for a new 100-bed facility are estimated at \$6.2 million. To save money, however, the state has been looking at possible existing structures, including the former Rivendell Psychiatric facility in Seward.

"We've voiced an interest," Clarke said.

Annual upkeep costs for the camp would be \$1.5 million, according to Clarke.

David Splichal, president of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln chapter of the National Organization for the Reformation of Marijuana Laws, was the only other person on hand to testify for the bill.

He said he had been hounding the committee for a long time, saying the military approach wouldn't work.

"The military approach of getting in people's face isn't what we need," he said. "People don't respond to that. If we don't examine the root causes, then we're doing no good."

Splichal said he applauded the committee for finally realizing that it took more than prisons to make a difference.

"This is a step in the right direction for corrections," he said.

The committee took no action on the bill Friday.