

John Rather – An asteroid and an internationally known scientific innovator

By: D. Ray Smith | Historically Speaking | The Oak Ridger | September 16, 2008

Oak Ridge is the one place in the world where a person should never be surprised by anyone they happen to meet and what skills and abilities they might have. We have scientists with world renowned reputations as experts in many various fields. It is not uncommon to see a citizen of Oak Ridge featured on some special television program related to almost any scientific area of expertise.

Oak Ridge also has a large number of innovative individuals who have created very successful businesses. It is not unusual to see entrepreneurs doing almost anything that can be imagined. So, it should not be a surprise to anyone that we have a firm in Oak Ridge named, *Rather Creative Innovations Group, Inc.*, a name that also celebrates the sense of humor of the creator.

I first met John Rather when he made a presentation to the Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club a few weeks ago. What intrigued me most about his presentation was not the magnetic lift people mover trains, although the thought of such an innovative demonstration running from the Oak Ridge City Center (Oak Ridge Mall) around the immediate area of the high school, library, city hall, American Museum of Science and Energy,

Secret City Commemorative Walk and maybe even the Oak Ridge Visitor Center before going up to Oak Ridge Summit on Pine Ridge down to Y-12's New Hope Center, ORAU's South Campus, ORNL's Spallation Neutron Source, ORNL's main campus, K-25 and back to Oak Ridge City Center is intriguing.

The portion of John's presentation that caught my attention most was his idea for saving the "L" shaped newest and best part of the Oak Ridge Mall. The idea of preserving the mall has not been a high profile item of discussion lately. Just getting *anything* done in the mall has been more in line with mainstream thinking, I believe.

Yet, that "L" shaped walkway from Belk's to Penny's is well worth saving from the imminent wrecking ball. John told the rotary club why it is an immensely valuable resource that soon will be gone unless something is done to modify current plans.

I have never quite understood the rationale that held the best path forward was to demolish a perfectly good structure to mimic Turkey Creek's clusters of small stores. I believe that approach is limited in scope and will result in failures of many of the smaller stores before too long.

Unless retail stores in Oak Ridge are of equal caliber and of the high quality of the best in Turkey Creek and West Town, Oak Ridgers will continue to drive the short and easy distance to either of those locations to purchase the quality of goods that Oak Ridgers expect and will pay to get. Remember that Pellissippi Parkway runs "both ways" and it is a beautiful and relaxing short drive.

The failure of retail in Oak Ridge might well be dated back to the time that management of the anchor stores in the Oak Ridge Mall decided it was a good idea to bring merchandise from Knoxville stores that was not selling there and try and push it in the Oak Ridge market. A market they mistakenly determined to be ready to accept second quality merchandise. Wrong!

John's idea for an innovative approach to integrating the "L" into the new Oak Ridge Center City as a "totally 'green' energy-independent showcase attracting international attention" is the kind of thinking that one might expect from an Oak Ridger. He went on to describe the mall redevelopment as, "a unique catalytic commercial center demonstrating new energy technologies," and "the world's first congregation of smart energy company outlets."

John further stated the City Center can be, "a beautiful place for people to meet, eat, shop and buy! (while learning about breakthrough energy and life technologies), " and "a place with unique architectural and construction features that will attract clients from far and wide." The Center City could rapidly become a catalyst for new business successes not available in Knoxville or elsewhere.

John Rather – An asteroid and an internationally known scientific innovator

By: D. Ray Smith | Historically Speaking | The Oak Ridger | September 16, 2008

The type of occupants envisioned by John are major energy saving product outlets, boutique-type dealerships of hybrid cars, computers and home entertainment centers efficient appliance stores and modern art and design shops. Also green building technologies and energy saving products would be features along with engineering and architectural offices.

Lifestyle occupants would feature excellent food in attractive locations, small independent bistros, high quality specialty food markets, excellent wine and liquor stores with tasting cellars, with all purchases delivered to loading docks.

A key element in this whole approach is saving the “L” portion of the existing mall structure. That portion of the mall consists of 200,000 square feet of excellent space. It has a huge roof area that can be considered for alternate energy sources. The area can easily and quickly become occupied by businesses. AND, John thinks Oak Ridger’s like the “L” and want it back! I agree.

The cost of replacement of the retail space encompassed in the “L” is huge. It makes sense to preserve it. The “L” portion of the mall was built in 1988. It is actually a beautiful and spacious inside facility for anyone who likes to walk indoors, not to speak of doing business!

There are at least thirty store spaces and these locations could be occupied immediately. The structure may well be worth close to \$25,000,000. Why in the world would anyone want to tear that down and then build space for thirty stores scattered around the parking lot?

Converting this “L” into a showcase of an energy efficient and economically sound structure fits right into the theme of Oak Ridge being a world leader in energy research. It can become a living example of the new resurgence of America’s energy development and efficiency.

The recent announcement by Senator Lamar Alexander for a “new Manhattan Project” initiative aimed at making America energy independent and more environmentally friendly within a generation was made at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. That location was chosen precisely because here is where the initiative should originate.

In the Senator’s announcement he went on to clarify the initiative as dealing with rising gasoline prices, electricity prices, clean air, climate change and national security. All of these are areas of expertise that Oak Ridge can address...maybe better than anywhere else in the world.

Rather than attempting to copy Knoxville (Turkey Creek) or anywhere else, maybe Oak Ridge should strike out on a renewed path that plays to our strengths. Rather than trying traditional approaches to increasing tax revenue, maybe Oak Ridge should team with the government agencies and entrepreneurs (such as John Rather’s *Rather Creative Innovations Group, Inc.*) to pursue options that others cannot.

John says, “Oak Ridge can become the fulcrum to move the world – AGAIN!” I believe that is true. As I often encourage regarding Heritage Tourism, we should promote our strengths and our heritage for the world to see and to appreciate. By developing a shopping center as described by John Rather, we take the lead in an area where the rest of the world will be heading – energy independence and efficiency.

Oak Ridge has done it before and can do it again. Our heritage is demonstrated in the challenges we accept and the successes we achieve in the difficult things that others cannot accomplish. Our Oak Ridge Center City should be no exception. Let’s not just repeat what others have done, let’s strike out in a new direction of leadership.

I should explain the comment about John Rather being an asteroid. Actually the asteroid is named (7290) *Johnrather* and was discovered May 11, 1991 by Eleanor Helin at Palomar Observatory.

John Rather – An asteroid and an internationally known scientific innovator

By: D. Ray Smith | Historically Speaking | The Oak Ridger | September 16, 2008

The formal official dedication reads, “The asteroid was named in honor of Dr. John Rather, astrophysicist, on completion of his 60th revolution around the sun on January 25, 1998. Long associated with special projects at NASA and in industry, he served in the early 1990’s as chair of the Near-Earth Object Interception Committee, which examined possible mitigation processes against the threat of minor planets and comets on collision courses with the earth. As a direct consequence of his urging the use of an aggressive treatment that allowed his wife to triumph over cancer, he has in recent years transferred his interest in mitigation to a new career in leading –edge research to fight this scourge.”

John’s first scientific achievement was the winning the physical sciences first prize at the 1953 National Science Fair held in Oak Ridge. From there he went on to achieve many more accomplishments in science and other endeavors. His experience in business and government spans defense, space, medical and academic communities. In all of which he achieved substantial recognition as an innovator and creative force for significant and substantial successful solutions to tough technical problems.

Examples of his successful challenges are working in Physics and Astronomy research at three National Laboratories, private sector large applied research and development initiatives, expert testimony for the U.S. House, Senate and White House on technology and science policy, Vice President for Research and technology Innovation at Kaman Aerospace Corporation, Manager of Advanced Concept Systems Integration for NASA headquarters in Washington, DC, space systems development for the Strategic Defense Initiative, and twenty years as a consultant to the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency.

In 2001, Dr. Rather was appointed University Professor of Physics by the President of Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. He is only the fourth person so honored in the history of the University.

Now, John is back in Oak Ridge. He has returned to a place he fondly recalls from earlier experience working here. He told me about two experiments he worked on at Y-12 and both of them were historic artifacts that should have been preserved. John has lived in many places and has traveled the world over even to taking a 1.6 meter telescope to northern Kenya, back in 1973, to observe the longest eclipse of the sun until 2150.

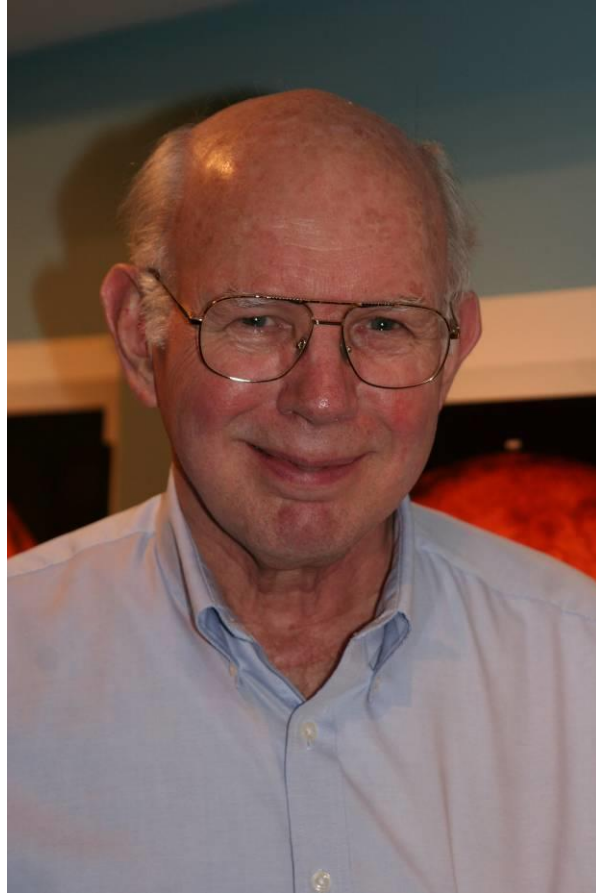
This unique experience that required extensive planning and coordination between many agencies and government offices to transport 5,000 pounds of equipment 350 miles north of Nairobi led to an expansion of John’s experience base. He says this event actually changed his life forever as it took him from personal experimentation to arranging collaborative efforts to achieve even more important outcomes than he could possibly achieve alone.

The best example of such collaborative research and creative solutions happened after his wife was diagnosed with cancer. He began an extensive personal self-guided study of cancer and for a number of years served as a catalyst for innovation in cancer diagnosis research. Ultimately the results of that initiative may well allow very early detection of cancer through mass screening of the population.

And to think that we in Oak Ridge now have the benefit of such a dynamic and innovative person as John Rather. Yet, he is just “one of us” here in Oak Ridge as many of the world’s most innovative individuals reside in our city. Welcome home John!

John Rather – An asteroid and an internationally known scientific innovator

By: D. Ray Smith | Historically Speaking | The Oak Ridger | September 16, 2008



John Rather, a scientific innovator extraordinaire and proponent of Oak Ridge's unique opportunity to lead the nation and even the world in energy related technologies

John Rather – An asteroid and an internationally known scientific innovator

By: D. Ray Smith | Historically Speaking | The Oak Ridger | September 16, 2008



Aerial photo of Oak Ridge Mall courtesy of Charlie Hensley that John Rather believes has tremendous potential for redevelopment into a showcase for Senator Alexander's "New Manhattan Project" breakthrough energy and life technologies