

Model shows that even with new planets, Earth would have plenty of elbowroom

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My very excellent mother just served us nine pickles.

Variations aside, it's been the tried-and-true way for generations of children to learn the order of the nine planets that make up our solar system. At least until Thursday, when the International Astronomical Union, the governing body that decides such matters, likely will add three more to the list.

With at least three new planets - Ceres, Pluto's moon Charon, and the yet-unnamed 2003 UB313 - Earth's planetary neighborhood could become 33 percent more crowded.

So could the planetary exhibit of the Challenger Learning Center for Science and Technology in Woodstock, which currently has a large banner for each planet as part of a space exploration game.

"They're the experts. They decide what they decide," center Executive Director Steven Otten said. "It's kind of interesting. It means we'd have to add three new planet banners out there, ... but I'm going to wait and see what they come up with."

So will millions of children and teachers soon to return to school. Eight-year-old Grant Rodgers could name five of the nine planets as his family enjoyed a picnic lunch on Main Beach in Crystal Lake. His older brother, Colton, could name eight. Though Grant said picking up the new ones might not be too difficult, Colton was not too sure. "It's going to be a lot harder," he said.

Grant forgot Pluto, the distant, frozen world that started the whole mess. It was named a planet after American astronomer Clyde Tombaugh discovered it in 1930, but its status was disputed starting in 1992 when astronomers concluded that the tiny planet smaller than the continental United States was just a small part of the Kuiper Belt, icy flotsam left over from the solar system's creation.

The 2005 discovery of 2003 UB313 - jokingly nicknamed "Xena" by discoverer Michael Brown until the union picks a name - forced the union to set criteria for what a planet is, especially when 2006 measurements concluded that "Xena" is larger than Pluto.

The new rules set specific criteria on a number of factors - for example, Pluto's moon Charon will be a planet, but Earth's moon, which is larger than both, will not. And the asteroid Ceres will be a planet, despite being about the size of Texas.

If the union's definition is approved, the new planetary order will be Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Ceres, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto, Charon and 2003 UB 313.

To grasp the size, and emptiness, of the solar system, one only has to look at Crystal Lake District 47 schools, which serve as a scale model between 1 billion and 2 billion sizes smaller.

The Sun is represented as a beach ball-sized concrete sphere near the track at Lundahl Middle School, where Mercury through Jupiter can be found with a good pair of walking shoes. Pluto is the size of a pencil eraser in front of West Elementary School, about 2.2 miles away.

By comparison, 2003 UB 313 would be 4.5 miles away, or just short of Memorial Medical Center in Woodstock.

Dr. Jeffery Chamberlain has watched the planetary debate with great interest. Now living in Grand Rapids, Mich., Chamberlain, 28, built the solar system model in 1994 for his Eagle Scout project. He supports Pluto's status as a planet, but does not want a solar system of hundreds of planets as more distant objects are discovered.

And as a doctor in residence, he does not have the time to come back and pour more concrete posts.

"I'm kind of a nostalgic person, so I like Pluto being a planet," Chamberlain said. "But when you start thinking of all the other things that may be defined the same way as Pluto is, then you have a dozen or a couple of hundred planets. The average person can't know them all if there are hundreds of them."

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