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Local News

'Mauna Kea is not for sale'

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Telescope discussion has economy, technology at odds

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An overflow crowd packed into Keaukaha Elementary School's cafeteria Tuesday night to learn more and talk about what would be the world's largest optical/infrared telescope.

Leaders of the Hawaiian community and of the astronomy community rubbed shoulders at the next-to-last public scoping meeting on the Big Island for what is being called the Thirty Meter Telescope. They argued for and against the telescope coming to Hawaii from opposing economic and cultural perspectives.

An association of Canadian and Californian research universities has proposed to build the telescope on either the northwest slope of Mauna Kea or on a remote mountaintop in the Chilean desert.

If built on Mauna Kea, the roughly \$1 billion telescope would be the largest observatory of its kind, cementing Hawaii's status for decades as the world's window to the stars.

For it to be built in Hawaii, the TMT must navigate a maze of regulatory and environmental hurdles, beginning with the current series of meetings. If Tuesday night was any indication, the supporters have a long way to go to convince Hawaiians about the benefit of the project.

At times, it seemed as though the 25 speakers were discussing two completely different topics, with some warning of a cultural disaster for the Big Island and others describing an economic miracle.

Kealoha Pisciotta, whose group Mauna Kea Anaina Hou, has sued the University of Hawaii over the lack of a comprehensive management plan, argued that the TMT "will in fact desecrate Mauna Kea and Mauna Kea's cultural and religious significance."

"Mauna Kea is not for sale," Pisciotta said. "It is a burial ground, and we would ask you to take the same position as if it were your burial ground. Enough is enough."

Hawe Keliikoa, representing Manu O Ku Hawaii, asked when the University of Hawaii's lease of Mauna Kea from the Department of Land and Natural Resources expires.

"I know we ain't going to stand for any renewal of the lease," Keliikoa said.

"What I really oppose is the use of community input to violate my religious rights," said Hank Fergerstrom of the Temple of Lono.

Testimony on the project was split, some speakers in favor, some opposed and some arguing for compromise.

"I wholeheartedly support this TMT," said Linda Gregoire, a small business owner who said she had to find a second job. She argued that the telescope would inject money into the economy.

"Big business doesn't come knocking on our door every day," she said into a microphone.

Another small business owner, Wheeler Cole, concurred with Gregoire.

"I don't personally think that the economic future of the island is going to be solved by farming and tourism, Cole said. "This is an opportunity that comes by once in a generation."

Inge Heyer, Science Outreach Specialist at the Joint Astronomy Center, welcomed the telescope into the community, linking it



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More than 90 people crowd into the Keaukaha Elementary School Cafeteria on Tuesday evening to take part in the Thirty Meter Telescope Environmental Impact Statement scoping process. The scheduled three-hour meeting was divided into an open house, a half hour of presentations about the telescope and public comment. - William Ing/Tribune-Herald

to improvements in education and the economy.

For some, the answer was not as easy as choosing a pro or con.

"I truly believe that this Thirty Meter Telescope, we can do this in a respectful, right way that can enrich our culture, our tradition, our customs, because we can do this in a way that can repatriate native Hawaiian rights and give it back to them," Damien Silva said. "As a native Hawaiian, I am torn. I am torn between Mauna Kea as a special place for the Hawaiians and their culture, but also ... as a native Hawaiian man who tries to make a living for his family."

Pablo McCloud, a former Mauna Kea ranger who now works at Subaru Telescope and who was speaking for himself, called for TMT to provide scholarships, a job training program at Hawaii Community College and create a Cultural Affairs Office within TMT.

Ka'iu Kimura, the associate director of the 'Ilioa Astronomy Center of Hawaii, told TMT officials to "significantly invest in education" in Hawaii if the telescope were to be built here.

"I hope we can create an environment where we can no longer feel torn," Kimura said, referring to Silva's comments.

The more than 90 people at Tuesday night's meeting was a fivefold increase from the one at Oct. 6 in Hawi. There, the two facilitators begged the 16 people in attendance to speak up and closed the meeting an hour early when nobody did.

Before the public spoke, EIS manager Sandra Dawson gave a presentation about the TMT process, and CalTech astronomy professor Anneila Sargent spoke about the science benefits.

"There are no military partners," Dawson said, trying to debunk a persistent rumor. "There are no military ties. There are no military applications. So this is a science project."

Minutes later, she emphasized that there were no federal funds involved, hence no federal EIS.

She said TMT was "committed to good stewardship."

The comments gathered in these public meetings will be incorporated into a draft EIS, which will be published around the spring of 2009. After gathering more comments from a second round of public meetings, the TMT board of directors will wait for the final approval of the Mauna Kea Comprehensive Management Plan, developed by the University of Hawaii, before issuing the final EIS.

When Hawaii's governor accepts the EIS, the board will make a final decision where to build the telescope. If Mauna Kea is chosen, the nonprofit TMT Corp. will seek approval from the Board of Land and Natural Resources.

Construction would take about seven years after approval. The telescope's lifespan is expected to be 50 years, after which it would be decommissioned.

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Comment on TMT

The public is invited to these two remaining public scoping meetings on the Thirty Meter Telescope:

Today

Pahoa High School Cafeteria 5-8 p.m.

Thursday

Neal S. Blaisdell Center, Pikake Room, Honolulu 5-9 p.m.

The final day to submit public comment for the draft EIS is Oct. 23. All comments will be answered and incorporated into the draft. People can send their comments in the following ways:

- Public comments can be sent by mail to:

University of Hawaii at Hilo, Office of the Chancellor, 200 W. Kawili St., Hilo, HI 96720-4091. Contact (808) 974-7311.

- A toll-free hotline for more information on the project has been set up at 1-866-284-1716.

- The EIS Web site, where the EIS Preparation Notice is posted, is at <http://www.tmt-hawaiiieis.org>. Public comment can also be submitted through the Web site.

- Sandra Dawson, TMT site studies manager, can be reached at her Hilo office at (808) 934-5910.

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