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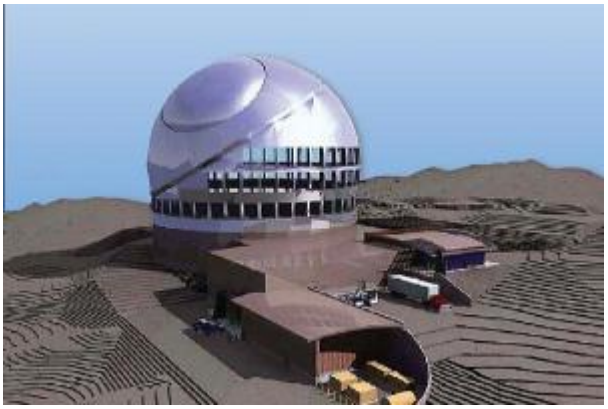
Local News

Scoping out future



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Thirty Meter Telescope

Report: Good outweighs bad on giant telescope

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A long-awaited environmental report on the world's largest optical/infrared telescope planned for the summit of Mauna Kea says the overall public benefit of the project outweighs any "unavoidable adverse impacts."

If Hawaii were selected as the preferred site, and if the state Board of Land and Natural Resources approved it, from 2011 to 2018 an average of 50 to 60 construction workers a day would arrive at the 13,150-foot high work site, building the Thirty Meter Telescope with its 98-foot wide primary mirror within a dome enclosure 180 feet tall and 216 feet in diameter.

Next to the dome would be a three-level support building with a 28,000-square-foot footprint. Including the parking lot, 5 acres of the mountain's slope would be graded, plus an unpaved, 0.6-mile access road connecting the TMT to the summit region.

TMT's Mid-Level Facility would be built near the 9,200-foot elevation of Hale Pohaku, and then turned over to the University of Hawaii for general use after construction ended.

Also proposed is a TMT headquarters building of 20,000 to 35,000 square feet, located in Hilo, and a satellite offfice in Waimea, between 10,000 and 25,000 square feet.

The economic, scientific and cultural impacts of such a large development on a mountain regarded by many as sacred has drawn tremendous community interest; an estimated 290

people have attended a series of public meetings late last year, and 217 comments were received.

Battle lines have long been drawn over the project. Labor unions, business and astronomy interests favor bringing the telescope to Hawaii, due to the unprecedented economic impact and scientific prestige it could bring.

Alternately, environmental and Hawaiian activist groups have been just as outspoken in opposition, citing the potential for environmental harm, loss of indigenous species like the wekiu bug, and the desecration of the mountain. They favor locating the observatory at TMT's other candidate site, the mountain Cerro Armazones in Chile's Atacama Desert. The final decision on where to build the telescope will be made following the acceptance of the final environmental impact statement in 2010.

The EIS proper is 302 pages, and was released with a 554-page cultural impact assessment. The hefty document delves into many of the concerns that were raised at the public scoping meetings, including impacts to flora and fauna, cultural resources, dust, noise and the view.

"We're delighted it's out. It's 300-plus pages," said EIS manager Sandra Dawson. She was especially proud of a proposed "Workforce Pipeline Program" that would train a highly qualified local pool of employees.

"If the TMT does come to Hawaii, kids in middle school right now would be the ones running the telescope," Dawson said.

Citing the radical design of the enclosure, the wastewater that would be trucked off the mountain and the low-visibility reflective aluminum-type dome, Dawson called the TMT an exceptionally environmentally friendly telescope.

Should the project proceed on Mauna Kea, long-term unavoidable and adverse impacts include:

-- Moving a shrine, built within the last 10 years, on the TMT project site.

-- The telescope dome would be visible from Honokaa, Waimea and Waikoloa.

-- An increase in traffic, wastewater, use of potable water, dust, vehicle traffic and noise.

Short-term impacts related to construction and decommissioning are also addressed.

"Although these potential impacts are considered to be unavoidable at a certain level, compliance with rules, regulations and requirements plus the proposed mitigation measures would minimize the level of impact and that level would be less than significant," the EIS states.

"Notwithstanding these unavoidable impacts, the project should proceed because the project would be in compliance with existing land use plans, policies and controls, provide a socioeconomic benefit to the island community and state, and provide for the public good by achieving its purposes and objectives."

The increased activity on the mountain could be lessened if employees were to carpool at Hale Pohaku before going up to the summit.

The EIS, which spells Mauna Kea as one word, elaborates on the visual impact that the dome would have from lower elevations:

"The TMT Observatory would not be visible in the view of Maunakea from Pahoa-Keaau, Volcano-Keaau Roads, and various Puna subdivisions or from locations where Hilo Bay is visible

with Maunakea in the background. Although the TMT may be visible in the view of Maunakea from portions of the South Kohala district and the area around Waimea, it would not block or substantially obstruct the views and viewplanes of the mountain."

Terrain models show that the TMT would be visible from 14 percent of the Big Island, mostly from the northwest side, to about 23,000 people.The university's lease on Mauna Kea's summit lands expires in 2033, by which time the telescope would be decommissioned and the site restored, "unless a new lease extension is obtained from the BLNR."