

Local News

Thirty Meter Telescope in focus



Six meetings on island to gather public input

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The public is invited to weigh in this week and next on the environmental impacts of the proposed Thirty Meter Telescope.

Six meetings will be held around the Big Island, plus one in Honolulu, to gather public comment on the billion-dollar project, which would be the world's largest optical/infrared telescope.

The TMT Board of Directors in California is expected to render a decision on whether to locate the telescope on the north slope of Mauna Kea or in Chile at its meeting during the week of July 20. Should Hawaii be chosen, the environmental review process will continue.

All the public meetings open at 5 p.m. and end at 8 p.m., with the exception of the Hilo meeting, which opens at 4 p.m.

Sandra Dawson, the environmental impact statement manager for the TMT, said the first hour will be an "open house" in which 12 observatory representatives will stand before 30 different poster boards and be available for one-on-one questions.

Following that will be a 40-minute presentation on the EIS and astronomy. A public discussion, in which people will be able to stand and speak up, will close out the meeting.

To be incorporated into the Final EIS, comments need to be submitted in writing or verbally to a recorder who will be seated in the back of the room, Dawson said. Comments may also be submitted through the Web site, by mail to the chancellor's office at the University of Hawaii at Hilo, or through the hotline at 1-866-284-1716.

Speakers at the upcoming meetings will be asked to limit their comments to three minutes, "given the number of people we're expecting," Dawson said.

The 300-page draft EIS, with a 550-page companion volume on cultural impacts, examines the effects of building the TMT at the 13,150-foot elevation on Mauna Kea and concludes it would bring significant economic benefits. The issue is complicated by its location on Mauna Kea, revered as an ancestral burial ground for Hawaiians, as well as the home of the wekiu bug, a rare insect on the mountain's upper slopes that is proposed for listing as an endangered species.

According to the EIS, if Hawaii were chosen as the preferred site and the state Board of Land and Natural Resources gave its approval, grading and foundation work for the TMT site would begin in 2011. Work on the telescope itself and the 180-foot tall dome would begin in 2012 and end four or five years later. Telescope testing would begin in 2017, and operations would begin in 2018.

With a primary mirror 98 feet in diameter, and comprised of 492 individual mirror segments, the TMT will have nine times the light-collecting power of each of the W.M. Keck Observatory telescopes, currently the largest of its kind in the world.

Along with the telescope, plans call for a three-level support building to be erected beside it, an access road connecting it to the summit region, a facility at Hale Pohaku at the 9,200-foot level, a headquarters building in Hilo and a satellite office in Waimea.

The EIS is available online for review at <http://www.tmt-hawaiiis.org>. So far, few public comments have been received, Dawson said.

"Most comments for an EIS come in in the last few weeks," she said. The deadline to submit comments is July 7.

Last Friday, scores of people rallied in Hilo to drum up support for bringing the TMT to Hilo, touting the project's numerous benefits, including the tremendous amount of money that could flow into the economy and the Workforce Pipeline Program, which would train local people to operate the high-paying observatories. But the project has its detractors.

Kealoha Pisciotta, president of Mauna Kea Anaina Hou and a former telescope operator, called the EIS "outrageous" for being "filled with inaccuracies" for miscounting the number of telescopes.

Pisciotta said a federal EIS, not a state EIS, should have been prepared because the project is accepting funds from the National Science Foundation.

"They're claiming that they have no federal funding," Pisciotta said. "Why are they so unwilling to follow the law?"

Pisciotta also questioned the EIS finding of no significant adverse impact. "In the alternatives they offer, they don't talk about Chile," she said.

Third, she said, the EIS refers often to the Mauna Kea Comprehensive Management Plan, which is not in effect because several groups, including Pisciotta's, have requested a contested case hearing.

"We are probably going to have to go all the way to the Supreme Court, which takes on average five years," Pisciotta said. The contested case request is still under review, but if the state denies it, the decision will be appealed to the courts.

No telescope may be approved without the CMP, Pisciotta said.

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Draft EIS Public Meetings

- Tuesday, Waimea Elementary School Cafeteria, 5-8 p.m.
- Wednesday, Hilo High School Cafeteria, 4-8 p.m.
- Thursday, Pahoa High School Cafeteria, 5-8 p.m.
- June 22, Ka'u High/Pahala Elementary School Cafeteria, 5-8 p.m.
- June 23, Kohala Cultural Center, 5-8 p.m.
- June 24, Kealakehe Elementary School Cafeteria, 5-8 p.m.
- June 25, Farrington High School Cafeteria (Honolulu), 5-8 p.m.

For more information on the TMT Draft EIS, visit <http://www.tmt-hawaiiis.org> at <http://www.tmt-hawaiiis.org>. For general information on the TMT project, visit <http://www.tmt.org>.