

Local News

Telescope receives a warm reception in Waimea

Majority of speakers during meeting voices support for TMT

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WAIMEA -- A friendly crowd filled an elementary school cafeteria Tuesday night to speak in favor of locating the Thirty Meter Telescope in Hawaii.

The Waimea meeting was the first of six meetings being held around the Big Island, plus one on Oahu. If approved and completed on time, an observatory with a primary mirror 98 feet across could be up and operating on the north slope of Mauna Kea by 2018.

TMT board members will meet July 20-21 in California to decide whether to build the telescope on Mauna Kea or on Cerro Armazones, a remote mountain in Chile.

The mood in Waimea, home of the W.M. Keck Observatory headquarters, was not unanimous, but of the 16 people who spoke, nine favored the TMT. A smaller number was opposed to bringing the telescope and the rest were ambivalent.

Richard Ha, a farmer and member of the Hawaii Economic Development Board's TMT Committee, spoke of his efforts to have TMT fund a \$1 million community benefits package.

Judi Steinman, executive officer of the Hawaii Island Chamber of Commerce, told a crowd of about 50 people that the chamber "strongly supports the TMT coming to Hawaii Island."

"Our members see the TMT as an important part of our island's business community to ensure the strength of our economy," Steinman said.

"We can have a balance between Hawaiian culture and science," said Mark Lossing, who said he represented more than 500 unemployed construction workers. "I also support the TMT because it will provide Big Island jobs."

Andrew Cooper argued the scientific benefits of the telescope while wearing a yellow button that said, "TMT YES!"

Keawe Vredenburg took a different tack, asking for the development of a "Mauna Kea Protocol Management Plan" to protect the mountain's numerous cultural resources.

Clarence "Ku" Ching disagreed. He was one of the plaintiffs in the court case that led to the development of the Mauna Kea Comprehensive Management Plan, and remains a strong

opponent of building the TMT in Hawaii.

"I believe that the draft EIS (environmental impact statement), which is the subject of tonight's discussion, is tainted. It's ... full of misrepresentations, deceit and fraud."

Wiley Knight, a former technician for the Canada-France-Hawaii Telescope, asked that the TMT be built where the aging NASA Infrared Telescope Facility stands, instead of a "pristine area."

Before the meeting, TMT representatives provided a preview of their presentations for the news media and answered some of the objections that Kealoha Pisciotta, an opponent of the telescope, had publicly raised.

Pisciotta had said, among other things, that the acceptance of federal funds triggers the need for a federal EIS.

"The federal government, federal agencies, they make that decision. We don't. And what triggers NEPA (National Environmental Protection Act) is a significant federal action," said Michael Bolte, director of California's Lick Observatory and member of the TMT Board of Directors.

Regarding the Mauna Kea Comprehensive Management Plan, "we are an independent process. The legal opinions are that right now we can go forward completely independent of anything that happens with the Comprehensive Management Plan."

Two people commented on the spelling "Maunakea" in the EIS, said Sandra Dawson, environmental impact statement manager for the TMT. She explained that the University of Hawaii, not TMT officials, chose to spell Mauna Kea as one word.

Jim Hayes spoke on behalf of Parsons Brinckerhoff, the consulting firm that produced the EIS.

Hayes explained how consultants focused on impacts to culture and historical resources, biology and aesthetics, because those areas were singled out in earlier meetings.

"There's no historic properties within 200 feet of the project, and there's no unique or prime geologic areas in the disturbance area," Hayes said. "We found the project would have minimal impact in the cinder cone habitat area, which is the most sensitive area."

The impacts of the 50 people working at the observatory daily would be mitigated by the mandatory "ride-sharing" for crews from Hale Pohaku, resulting in an estimated 12 vehicle trips per day.

Remaining issues to be resolved include the specific route for the access road, the level of decommissioning and whether the enclosure should be painted white, brown or with the preferred reflective finish.

Anneila Sargent, an astronomy professor at the California Institute of Technology, touted the myriad scientific benefits of the TMT, including an advanced adaptive optics system that would allow for images 10 times sharper than the Hubble Space Telescope.

TMT, she said, would allow a deeper, sharper view of the universe in the visible and infrared spectra than any observatory that exists today -- back to the formation of the first stars 13.3 billion light-years away.

More important than being able to image distant stars, arguably, will be an advanced instrument called a spectroscope, which can analyze the chemical elements of distant stars and even determine whether they have planets.

"The potential for what we can find is just astonishing," Sargent said.

The next meeting is today from 4 to 8 p.m. in the Hilo High School cafeteria.