

June 19, 2009

Rational plan for Mauna Kea is taking shape

More than ever, the proposal to build a \$1.2 billion 30-meter telescope is looking like a winning prospect for the advancement of scientific discovery atop Mauna Kea.

The project at issue, known as the Thirty Meter Telescope, is not yet a certainty. A decision by the consortium developing it on whether the facility will go the Big Island or on a mountain in Chile won't be made until later this summer.

But there are reasons to feel hopeful. Hawai'i has advantages over the remote competing location, not the least of which is its American base and relatively easy access from nearby communities (transit to the Chilean site takes more than two hours by car). That should encourage scientists, who want as few logistical complications as possible interfering with their work.

Just as important, however, is the benefit to the Big Island community: Not only would the telescope construction produce 140 badly needed jobs, but concerns about the mountain's cultural and physical environment will be addressed.

The first piece is the draft environmental impact statement now undergoing public comment through July 7.

The other elements include a robust Mauna Kea Comprehensive Master Plan, recently approved by the state Board of Land and Natural Resources, and rulemaking authority for the Office of Mauna Kea Management, the overseeing agency that will implement the plan.

That authority will give the office enforcement powers and the ability to hold hearings on more detailed plans for any telescope or activity proposed for the summit.

This should ensure that proposals are available for full public scrutiny, which is essential when dealing with a cultural and natural resource as important as this one.

Crystalline air quality, negligible light interference and the international community already engaged in scientific pursuits at the summit of Mauna Kea all combine to make astronomy a field in which Hawai'i can boast international acclaim.

Acute sensitivity is essential to achieving a balance between tapping the mountain's scientific riches without destroying the cultural ones. With careful planning and public input, that balance is within Hawai'i's grasp.