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Build the TMT on Mauna Kea

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In 1609, Galileo Galilei pointed his telescope to the sky and took an unprecedented look at the universe.

Four centuries later, the Big Island is poised to make the next giant leap in astronomy.

Officials for the proposed Thirty Meter Telescope will announce next month whether they have chosen Mauna Kea or Cerro Armazones in Chile as the site for the \$1 billion project.

If built, the TMT would be the largest optical/infrared telescope in the world, offering astronomers spectacular views of the stars.

Whether the telescope should be located atop Hawaii's tallest mountain has been the subject of a long and sometimes agonizing public debate.

Opponents of the TMT, mostly environmentalists and Native Hawaiians, fear the project will damage Mauna Kea, which many believe is a sacred place. Supporters, on the other hand, want the telescope built here because it would create jobs and solidify Hawaii's reputation as a leader in astronomy.

Last week, both sides weighed in on the TMT proposal, airing their views in meetings held around the island to discuss the findings of a long-awaited environmental impact statement.

The draft EIS identified a number of legitimate environmental and cultural concerns, but in the end it found the overall public benefit of the telescope outweighs any "unavoidable adverse impacts."

The TMT "should proceed because (it) 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 EIS said.

The Tribune-Herald agrees with the conclusions of the EIS and strongly endorses the TMT project. The telescope can and should be built on Mauna Kea, the world's preeminent location for astronomy.

The benefits of the TMT would be enormous and far-reaching. It would create scores of construction and science jobs, and would generate millions of dollars in spin-off revenue that would be enjoyed by many residents.

TMT also has pledged to spend \$1 million a year on a community benefit package that would provide funding for education on the Big Island, and it also plans to create a workforce development program aimed at training local people to work at the telescope.

Economic benefits aside, the TMT's many inevitable astronomical discoveries would be a boon to science, bolstering mankind's understanding of the universe.

While we concede that some negative impacts to Mauna Kea are likely, comprehensive mitigation measures -- such as trucking wastewater off the mountain and ensuring the dome's profile is low-visibility -- will help make the TMT project fairly harmless to the environment.

Moreover, the actual practice of observing the stars is relatively benign. As the U.S. moves further away from a manufacturing-based economy, astronomy is exactly the type of clean industry we should encourage and welcome in Hawaii.

Finally, it's also important to note that while the TMT debate appears to be a clash between culture and science, both can -- and do -- coexist on Mauna Kea. Decades of astronomy on the Big Island have proven that the two are not mutually exclusive, and management plans are being developed to help ensure that the interests of astronomers and Native Hawaiians are respected.

Despite the inevitable challenges ahead, the TMT should come to the Big Island -- a fitting and magnificent home for what

would arguably be the most impressive telescope on Earth.

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