

Local News

Give your 2 cents on 30 meter

Public comment on giant telescope begins

by *Peter Sur*

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The Thirty Meter Telescope has begun the long, bumpy environmental impact statement process, giving the public their first official chance to weigh in on the proposal.

The telescope developers, a consortium of research universities in Canada and California, have to complete a draft EIS before deciding whether to build the telescope on Mauna Kea's northern slope, or a remote mountain in northern Chile.

Tuesday's release of the EIS preparation notice kicked off the 30-day public comment period. Six public meetings are scheduled around the Big Island in October, and a seventh will be held on Oahu. These meetings are expected to be contentious, because of Mauna Kea's significance as a sacred mountain to the Hawaiian community, and the telescope's prominence as the world's largest of its kind -- the observatory would require four acres just above the 13,000-foot elevation. By comparison, Hilo Bay's Coconut Island is 3 acres.

New details about the impact and lifespan of the TMT were released in the EIS preparation notice.

"Construction of the telescope and its ancillary facilities would begin in 2010 and would be completed in approximately seven years," the document states. "Once construction is complete, a staff of approximately 120 people will be necessary to operate and maintain the observatory. Each night, four to six system operators, staff astronomers and visiting scientists would work at the observatory telescope. During the day, an estimated 40 members of the staff would work at the observatory on the summit, with the remaining approximately 80 members of the staff working at observatory facilities located outside the conservation district.

"The design life of the facility is expected to be around 50 years. At the completion of the design life, the facility would be decommissioned."

The TMT is the first in a series of next-generation telescopes that are expected to blow open the doors on the mysteries of the universe. With nine times the light-collecting power of each of the W.M. Keck Observatory telescopes, and 12 times the sharpness of the Hubble Space Telescope, the TMT would be able to peer some 13 billion light-years (76 septillion miles) with unprecedented clarity.

It will also be the largest structure ever built on Mauna Kea. The 30-meter (98-foot) figure refers to the diameter of the primary mirror. Also required is the rest of the telescope assembly, the dome enclosure, adjacent office and shop facilities, a separate utility building and a parking area.

Other facilities will include an access road from the summit complex to the new telescope site, construction baseyards and a support building for the telescope. The baseyard and support building may be located outside the conservation district.

When the public scoping process is completed, the draft EIS will have to await the completion and approval of the Mauna Kea Comprehensive Management Plan, which the UH Office of Mauna Kea Management is developing separately. The process will continue even though OMKM's first director, Bill Stormont, has been moved to the 'Imiloa Astronomy Center in what UH-Hilo is calling a "lateral transfer." Acting Director Stephanie Nagata is leading the office until a permanent head can be found.

"Preparation of a CMP meeting the requirements of this judicial decision is underway," the EIS document says. Although the requirements of the management plan will not be known until its adoption, the preparation notice is being issued first "to help initiate the early consultation process required by the Hawaii EIS law."

Following the completion of the management plan, the draft EIS will be released, followed by a second round of public meetings to gather comment.

When this second public comment period is finished, the TMT Board of Directors will vote on the location of the telescope.

If Mauna Kea is selected, it would require a number of regulatory steps, including the completion of the final design, the final EIS, the acceptance of the EIS by Gov. Linda Lingle, approval of the plans by the Mauna Kea Management Board and the UH Board of Regents, approval of a conservation district use permit by the Board and Land and Natural Resources and a National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permit, among others.

If this is completed, and assuming all court challenges are surmounted, and the project has secured all funding sources, the project may move forward.

The EIS preparation notice names some of the potential impacts that will receive extra scrutiny in the draft EIS. Short-term impacts include dust and erosion during site preparation, traffic issues, noise from construction activities and stormwater and runoff issues.

"The telescope could have impacts on cultural and historical resources, including the wahi pana, or sacred areas, or landscapes which include the summit region, the pu'u both on and along the summit, the viewplanes, Lake Wai'au, as well as the trail system. Hawaii law requires a thorough investigation of impacts on cultural and historic resources," the document says.

Other areas to be addressed include the impact on rare and endangered animals and plants, the TMT's visual impact, water resources, traffic, noise and the recreational and educational use of the mountain.

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Comments?

The public scoping meetings for the Thirty Meter Telescope will be held at the dates, times and places listed below.

Monday, Oct. 6

Kohala High School

Cafeteria 5-8 p.m.

Wednesday, Oct. 8

Kahilu Town Hall (Waimea Family YMCA) 5-8 p.m.

Thursday, Oct. 9

Kealakehe Elementary School Cafeteria 6-9 p.m.

Monday, Oct. 13

Ka'u High and Pahala Elementary School

Cafeteria 5-8 p.m.

Tuesday, Oct. 14

Keaukaha Elementary School Cafeteria 6-9 p.m.

Wednesday, Oct. 15

Pahoa High School Cafeteria 5-8 p.m.

Thursday, Oct. 16

Neal S. Blaisdell Center, Pikake Room 5-9 p.m.

- Public comments can be sent by mail to:

University of Hawaii at Hilo, Office of the Chancellor, 200 W. Kawili St., Hilo, HI 96720-4091.
Contact (808) 974-7311.

- A toll-free hotline for more information on the project has been set up at 1-866-284-1716.

- The EIS Web site, where the EIS Preparation Notice is posted, is at <http://www.tmt-hawaiiieis.org>. Public comment can also be submitted through the Web site.

- Sandra Dawson, TMT site studies manager, can be reached at her Hilo office at (808) 934-5910.