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Telescope planners say Big Isle testimony encouraging

*By Karin Stanton
For The Associated Press*

KAILUA, KONA — Planners of the proposed Thirty Meter Telescope atop Mauna Kea say they are encouraged by comments at a series of public meetings ahead of a state environmental impact statement.

The giant telescope would be the world's largest and most advanced, costing approximately \$1 billion.

Hundreds of residents attended six meetings across the Big Island over 10 days this month to share concerns and thoughts about the project, a partnership of the University of California, the California Institute of Technology and a Canadian university consortium.

Cerro Armazones in Chile is another possible site for the telescope, which would produce images three times as sharp as the Hubble Space Telescope.

Much of the testimony has been divided roughly into three categories, with some saying the telescope should be built at the other potential site in the mountains of Chile, some welcoming the economic and academic addition to the Big Island, and others wanting no more structures on a volcanic mountain Native Hawaiians consider sacred.

"I have been really impressed by the thoughts and the eloquence of some of the comments," said Sandra Dawson, TMT Observatory Corp. site manager.

"We have not been hearing a lot of 'no.' What we have been hearing is: 'If you come here, you need to do this,' or, 'If you're going to go up there, have respect for the mountain.' And that's something we really want to demonstrate as good neighbors and good stewards."

Dawson said TMT is committed to listening to the community throughout the environmental impact process, which will take about a year, and to working to benefit the entire state.

"This is a new paradigm of development in Hawai'i that is founded on integrating culture, science, sustainability and education," she said.

"We intend to make a significant investment in education if we come here."

Dawson said specifics have yet to be decided, but might include, for example, buying science textbooks for every sixth-grader on the island, supporting science teachers, offering internships and fellowships, or developing an adventures in science program.

The telescope is to be built entirely by U.S. and Canadian universities using money from private foundations and on land owned by the state, which means no federal environmental impact statement is required.

Dawson also said the U.S. military has no involvement in the project.

"They have no interest," she said. "There just is no military application here."

The final day to submit public comment for the draft impact statement is next Thursday.

All comments will be answered and incorporated into the draft.

An equivalent study already is complete in Chile.