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Local News

Scope crowd is light

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Concerns addressed on Thirty-Meter Telescope

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KAPAAU -- The first scoping meeting for Thirty-Meter Telescope, the world's largest optical/infrared telescope, drew a light crowd Monday night.

In Kohala High School's cafeteria, small knots of people milled about, examining poster boards and talking with project officials. The meeting ended at 7 p.m., an hour earlier than scheduled.

The TMT's backers want to build the telescope on a 4-acre footprint either on the northwestern plateau of Mauna Kea or on the summit of Cerro Armazones, a remote Chilean mountain. The TMT's board of directors will make a final decision on the telescope's location only after Gov. Linda Lingle accepts the final environmental impact statement.

"The Thirty-Meter Telescope is going to be the most advanced, most capable telescope the world has ever seen," said Anneila Sargent, an astronomy professor from the California Institute of Technology.

Monday's meeting was the first step in creating that document.

Although about 16 members of the public were present, only three stood up to speak. Two supported the project and the third wanted to know whether the TMT was affiliated with the U.S. military. Others submitted written comments.

Richard Ha, the owner of Hamakua Springs Country Farms, emphasized the educational possibilities of the project and its ability to serve as an economic engine distinct from tourism.

"I'd like to see the Thirty-Meter Telescope people invest in education. Because it's going to be here for 50 years. If we can keep on getting education for our keiki for the future, that's what I think is going to be useful for us anyway," Ha said.

TMT officials have stated they would give back to the community, but they have not released any detailed proposal yet.

Joe Carvalho, a retired banker from Halaula, also spoke in favor.

"When I heard about the TMT, I was really excited about it," Carvalho said. "I think this is a really exciting and great project for Hawaii. I still have some misgivings because it's been built on a mountain that our culture sort of holds sacred."

He said that if the telescope could be built "in a pono way," with economic and educational opportunities, "I think it will be well-received by the community."

Alex Achmat, a citizen activist, questioned whether any of the senior executives of the TMT are "high ranking military or, let's say, in a secretarial capacity in the military." He referred to the Hawaii Superferry, which critics have charged would move Stryker Brigade vehicles between islands.

"Absolutely not," said Sandra Dawson, the EIS manager. She said the telescope's goals were purely academic.

After the meeting, Achmat said his concerns were addressed.

Monday's meeting was a preliminary step that will guide the EIS process and determine what areas are worthy of further study.

The draft EIS may be issued next spring, followed by a second round of public meetings. The draft is expected to discuss in detail the project's impact on cultural practices, threatened and endangered species and the impact on Mauna Kea's scenery.

Before the public comment portion, Dawson and Sargent gave a presentation on the telescope project.

TMT Observatory Corp. is a nonprofit organization formed with the University of California, CalTech and the Association of Canadian Universities for Research in Astronomy.

Sargent acknowledged that some people in Hawaii will be opposed to the TMT being located on Mauna Kea, and tried to allay their concerns in advance.

"We have to say that we'd like to do this, but we'd like to do the right thing, and we'd talk to all participants, and that's what we're doing here."

E-mail Peter Sur at psur@hawaiitribune-herald.com.

Be a part of the process

The remaining schedule for the Thirty-Meter Telescope Environmental Impact Statement public scoping meetings is as follows:

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.

The final day to submit public comment for the draft EIS is Oct. 23. All comments will be answered and incorporated into the draft. People can send their comments in the following ways:

- 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-hawaii.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.

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