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An artist's rendering of the Thirty Meter Telescope atop Mauna Kea.
Courtesy photo



By TOM CALLIS Hawaii Tribune-Herald

HILO — The TMT International Observatory's decision to consider locations other than Mauna Kea for its next-generation telescope didn't come as much of a surprise to supporters of the project, given the hurdles it still faces.

But the announcement is nonetheless increasing anxiety that Hawaii Island could lose out on the jobs and funding for education that comes with the \$1.4 billion Thirty Meter Telescope.

"I think we put it in a precarious situation," said Bill Walter, Hawaii Island Chamber of Commerce vice president.

"You get the sense that the investing countries are getting very restive."

In addition to seeing more than 13 billion light years away, the telescope — which has faced strong opposition from some Native Hawaiians who consider the mountain sacred — is expected to create 300 construction jobs and 140 long-term jobs, earning it support of business groups and organized labor.

TMT also is contributing \$1 million a year for science, technology, engineering and math education on the island, which supporters note would be lost if the project goes elsewhere.

Ed Stone, TMT executive director, told Honolulu media outlets Wednesday that the telescope's board decided last week to get a "Plan B" ready should the project not regain its construction permit for the mountain.

In an interview with the Tribune-Herald, he reiterated they are not pulling the plug yet, but might end up doing so if they don't receive assurances the project can proceed by September 2017. That will allow it to begin construction again no later than April 2018.

"We would like to build it in Hawaii," he said, noting Mauna Kea remains the best spot for the telescope. "We're not looking for ways not to build it in Hawaii."



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Stone said the board set a deadline because they want to get the project finished while the James Webb Space Telescope is in use since they will work "synergistically" together. The project also needs a secured location to justify the investment and manufacturing of telescope parts that continues around the world, he said.

"The time has come when we need to start building it," Stone said.

Richard Wurdeman, attorney for opponents of the telescope, said he expects there to be a "long, drawn-out process" given the environmental and cultural issues involved with building on Mauna Kea. He said that process shouldn't be rushed.

"We intend to fully litigate the matter and make sure that all the evidence that needs to be presented is presented," Wurdeman said.

Stone said TMT would still proceed if it has a permit in time, even if that decision is being appealed.

TMT selected Hawaii for its telescope in 2009, and the project later cleared the state Board of Land and Natural Resources and a contested case hearing.

But its plans to build on the mountain began to fall apart last year as protesters blocked access to construction workers and the state Supreme Court overturned its land use permit.

Justices ruled the Land Board should not have voted in favor of the project before opponents made their case before a hearings officer.

The Department of Land and Natural Resources is preparing to hire a new hearings officer to consider another permit for the project, but the Land Board also has to wait for the matter to get sent back from a lower court before it can proceed.

While 19 months to get the permit might seem like plenty of time, the last contested case hearing for the project took about 21 months to resolve.

Guenther Hasinger, director of University of Hawaii's Institute for Astronomy, said that timeline might be optimistic.

But he noted UH remains behind the project and he doesn't consider failure to be an option.

"We don't have a Plan B," Hasinger said.

In a statement, UH, which subleases land to TMT and other telescopes on the mountain, said it remains "steadfast" in its support for the project.

"The project is a tremendous scientific and economic opportunity for Hawaii Island and the state," the university said in a statement. "It will be a cornerstone of the next generation of astronomy in Hawaii, one of the anchors of our research and innovation enterprise."

Even though the telescope isn't built, the project has become a major funding source for UH's management efforts on the mountain since its sublease was approved nearly two years ago.

According to UH's annual report to the Legislature on Mauna Kea, the telescope paid \$279,041 in rent for its sublease in fiscal year 2015, bringing UH's Mauna Kea lands special fund revenue to \$660,043.

The additional \$381,002 came from fees from commercial tour operators.

Of those funds, \$375,821.20 was used to defray costs of the Mauna Kea ranger program, Mauna Kea Visitor Information Station and facility and road maintenance, UH said.

The telescope is the first on the mountain to pay more than \$1 a year in rent.

That amount is currently at \$300,000 a year and will increase incrementally to \$1.08 million.

Stone said Mauna Kea is considered the best place for the telescope, at least in the Northern Hemisphere, and moving to another location will be considered a significant loss for the project.

"This is not just about astronomy," he added.

"It will be a loss for science, it will be a loss for Hawaii, it will be a loss for the United States."

TMT's partners include Caltech, University of California, Association of Canadian Universities for Research in Astronomy, and the national institutes in Japan, China and India.

Email Tom Callis at tcallis@hawaiiitribune-herald.com.

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WestHawaii96743 • 8 months ago

Yawn.....TMT is gone. No future or chance of tech careers for Hawaii's youth. It's too bad but done deal.

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rickokona • 8 months ago

Mr. Callis trivializes the Hawaii Supreme Court decision so as to have it appear as a minor nuance of law. The fact is the court held that the state acted in an unconstitutional manner breaching the 4th and 14th amendments. Sadly this is the third time in recent history the Court has ruled on due process violations of the state. All state officials are sworn to support and defend the constitution, unless of course they dont want to. Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom.

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LoHa  rickokona • 8 months ago

Mr. Callis is correct in trivializing the Supreme Court decision. If you watch the entire hearing (it's online) and read the documents, you would see that the court decided that it was a failure of due process to grant a provisional building permit contingent on the outcome of a contested case hearing that had not even been requested yet (opponents stated that they were going to file, but had not yet done so.) The contested case hearing was eventually conducted and the board rejected the opponents claims. The court found that the "mistake" was not intentional or biased - it was just a procedural anomaly. This is about as trivial a mistake as is possible to make.

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frank96740 • 8 months ago

It's time for the STATE and the thousands of people that support the TMT to get off their butts and assure the builders of this project that WE are in FACT the right place to build regardless of a few self-centered, misguided protesters!

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