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Local News

Telescope seeks builders

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Local companies compete for portion of \$1 billion construction pie

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Architects and engineers met with the Thirty Meter Telescope team Monday in Hilo in the first step toward the construction of the support buildings.

Before the TMT Corp. Board of Directors selected Mauna Kea as the location for its giant telescope last June, the project team could only focus on architectural elements that were applicable to both Hawaii and Chile.

Now that Chile is out of the picture, TMT is making a concerted effort to court local firms for the construction and renovation of several buildings at the 9,200-foot elevation of Mauna Kea and a 30,000-square-foot headquarters building in Hilo.

Monday's meeting did not cover the telescope itself or the support building, both of which would be located on the northwest slope of Mauna Kea several hundred feet from the summit. Several dozen representatives of contractors hoping to get a piece of the \$1 billion pie arrived at the Hilo meeting to introduce themselves to the project team.

"In my experience, it's better to have local architecture firms that work here," said Project Manager Gary Sanders. "We want to meet the local architects and begin some work and learn who we can work with."

Local firms know the codes, the climate and the costs of doing business in Hawaii, he said. "They will give us the best input to begin construction."

Addressing the group at the Hilo Hawaiian Hotel, Sanders said the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the TMT would be released in the last week of the year. The Conservation District Use Application would be filed next year, with construction of the telescope to begin around October 2011.

"We're just at the beginning stage," Sanders said.

The TMT is so named because of its primary mirror, which would be 30 meters, or 98 feet, in diameter. No single mirror that size could hold its shape, so it is comprised of 492 individual segments. The dome enclosure would be 216 feet in diameter and 184 feet tall, making it comparable in size to a basketball gym but much smaller than a football stadium.

When built in 2018 -- if all goes according to schedule -- the TMT would deliver images an order of magnitude more sensitive than the Hubble Space Telescope, and with finer detail.

But the telescope would be useless without its support buildings -- hence the meetings Monday. The headquarters building would be located in the University of Hawaii at Hilo Science and Technology Park, in the vicinity of the 'Imiloa Astronomy Center of Hawaii. It would include office and work space for 120 people, electronics and optics laboratories, a mechanical shop and a control room.

At the Onizuka Center for International Astronomy, contractors are sought for three projects that would reshape the mid-level facilities.

Unused buildings that once served as the dormitories for W.M. Keck Observatory employees would be torn down and replaced by lodging for 50 people, plus a kitchen, dining and recreation areas.

The historic stone buildings that comprised the original Hale Pohaku would be renovated.

The Visitor Information Station would also be expanded and renovated.



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Gary Sanders, project manager for the Thirty Meter Telescope, updates contractors, architects and engineers on Monday in Hilo about the status of the observatory. In the background is a conceptual image of the TMT. - Peter Sur/Tribune-Herald

"It's a too-small facility" at present, said Facilities Manager Paul Gillett.

Pratheep Eamranond, the senior contract specialist, said a draft Request for Proposals for the projects would be posted on the TMT Web site at <http://www.tmt.org>. A final RFP would then be posted on Friday.

Eamranond said in evaluating proposals he would consider experience, familiarity with the area, the qualifications of key personnel and the best value for TMT.

After an early lunch, the three TMT team members held informal one-on-one meetings with architects and engineers. Taisei Construction Corp., a general contractor that worked on the Subaru Telescope and 'Imiloa, was among the groups that hoped to win the contract.

"We're interested in the RFP that they're putting out here," said Vice President Benett J. Bolek. He was hopeful that the TMT would get approved.

TMT has signed a memorandum of understanding with several labor unions to pay the prevailing wage rates, said site manager Sandra Dawson.

The unions have joined with business interests in voicing strong support for bringing the telescope to Hawaii. TMT Corp. is a partnership organization comprised of the Association of Canadian Universities for Research in Astronomy, the California Institute of Technology and the University of California.

The telescope is funded largely by universities and private grants, most notably the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation.

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Key dates

Late 2010 -- Final Environmental Impact Statement for the TMT to be released

October 2011 -- Construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope to begin

2018 -- Anticipated completion of telescope

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