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Excitement, disappointment over TMT decision

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Reaction to the announcement that the Thirty Meter Telescope will be built on Mauna Kea fell along expected lines, with supporters elated and opponents disappointed.

Gov. Linda Lingle released a statement Tuesday lauding the decision as an economic and scientific boon for the state.

"Today's decision to build the Thirty Meter Telescope atop Mauna Kea marks an extraordinary step forward in the state's continuing efforts to establish Hawaii as a center for global innovation for the future," Lingle said. "The TMT is another important advancement that will help us achieve long-term prosperity for Hawaii.

"Over the next eight years, the TMT will create employment opportunities for our residents, including hundreds of jobs in the construction and related industries, as well as an estimated 140 full-time employees once the project begins operations."

Democratic U.S. Rep. Neil Abercrombie, who hopes to succeed the Republican governor in 2010, echoed the praise.

"It is a planetary imperative to reach out into the universe from Mauna Kea, the most exceptional viewing area on Earth for world-class telescopes," Abercrombie said in a statement. "This announcement strengthens Hawaii's vital role in the -terrestrial-based exploration of our universe and the future growth of an important part of the local high-technology industry."

Equally enthusiastic was Big Island Mayor Billy Kenoi.

"We're not going to be one of the premier locations for science and astronomy, but the premier place for science and astronomy," Kenoi said. "There's still a long process ahead and it's going to include having meaningful conversation and dialogue with all of the community stakeholders."

"This project will have to be sensitive to our unique and fragile environment and ecosystem here on our island," said the mayor, who has no direct role in the approval process.

The Hawaii Island Chamber of Commerce issued a statement saying it was "thrilled" at the news.

"TMT ensures our future as leaders in astronomy and will contribute greatly to the health and well-being of our island's economy. The chamber will continue to work to help in whatever way we can to support TMT, the OMKM (Office of Mauna Kea Management) and the university as the process goes forward."

Rolf-Peter Kudritzki, director of the University of Hawaii's Institute for Astronomy, was "extremely happy" to hear that the TMT board had decided in his favor. The university typically gets a share of the observing time for telescopes on Mauna Kea.

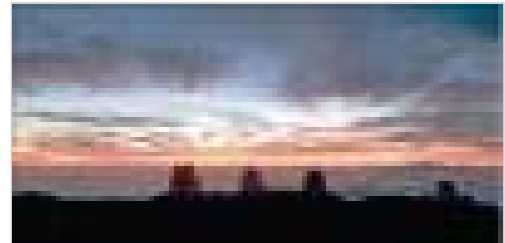
Had the telescope gone to Chile, "in the long run, it would have been hard to keep the science competitive with the largest facility in the world. That was one of the dangers. If the TMT had made the decision to come to Chile and not to Mauna Kea, then in 10, 20 years from now, the largest telescopes would have been in the southern hemisphere and not here in Hawaii ... But you know, that's not going to happen, and therefore we don't have to worry about it."

"As the director, you have to be ambitious that your institution stays on top of international science, as it does now," Kudritzki said.

UH-Hilo Chancellor Rose Tseng was "delighted" at TMT's decision, and said the university had the chance to do what's right.

OMKM has a lot to do, she said, including finishing the four sub-plans of the Mauna Kea Comprehensive Management Plan as directed by the Board of Land and Natural Resources and filing a conservation district use application.

Tseng said the Legislature's grant of administrative rule-making authority to the University of Hawaii allowed for real protection



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Three observatories -- Subaru, Keck I, Keck II -- are seen near the summit of Mauna Kea on July 5. - Peter Sur/Tribune-Herald

of Mauna Kea.

"We're going to make sure the rules are developed and followed," she said, calling for balance between academic prestige and the increased responsibility of managing Mauna Kea.

"Personally, I don't believe that we are only doing it because we want to be the No. 1 astronomy facility only. We have to make sure that the local kids, the natural resources, the whole sacred mountain is being taken care of," Tseng said.

Others were less enthusiastic about Tuesday's decision. Kealoha Pisciotta, a former telescope operator and president of Mauna Kea Anaina Hou, was one of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit against the University of Hawaii that forced cancellation of the Keck "Outrigger" telescopes and the creation of the Mauna Kea CMP. She and others, including representatives of the Sierra Club and the Royal Order of Kamehameha I, are prepared to go to court again to block the CMP and the land board's issuing of a conservation district use permit.

Kealoha said she was "disappointed" that the TMT board made its decision based on a draft environmental impact statement, rather than waiting for the final document to emerge, and said the federal government should have completed the study.

Kealoha planned to challenge constitutional issues in the CMP relating to public access. A public access sub-plan is being developed for the CMP.

"Those (constitutional issues) can go all the way to the Supreme Court," she said.

Speaking of the announcement, Pisciotta said "it's an unfortunate decision, it's a disappointing decision, and quite frankly it's a bad decision because if science is their goal, then they should go where they can do the science the fastest, not burden the taxpayers by hiring lawyers to fight the people who are going to fight 'em for their basic rights, like public access."

The Sierra Club is also "disappointed," at the decision on TMT, said Nelson Ho, speaking for the club. "I would say that this choice continues what the lawyers call a 'pattern of practice,' which shows that the UC, the University of California system, Caltech, and the University (of Hawaii) have a record of disregard for the resource constraints of Mauna Kea. And that's the natural resources and cultural resources."

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