University of Hawaii Board of Regents  
Meeting at University of Hawaii at Hilo  
April 16, 2015 at 11:30am

Aloha Regents,

Mahalo for addressing the issue of the Thirty Meter Telescope on Mauna Kea which weighs on the hearts and minds of many in Hawaii and throughout the world today.

I am a proud graduate of University of Hawaii’s William S. Richardson School of Law. I care about how decisions are made at the University, and the impact of those decisions on Hawaii’s people and land. I ask you to please reconsider the University’s Sublease and Non-Exclusive Easement Agreement with TMT International Observatory, LLC, and to truly listen with open hearts and minds today.

For somebody quickly trying to understand the TMT issue, it is easy to frame it as a battle between Hawaiian culture verses science, pigeon holing the proponents as science advocates, and the opponents as Native Hawaiian protestors standing in the way. It is much harder and more uncomfortable to see the totality of the TMT issue, but for anybody who loves Hawaii, including all of you, it is worth the time and discomfort.

I think all would agree that you are not in an easy position. As the governing body of the University of Hawai‘i System, yours is a great kuleana – an immense privilege as well as a burden. All of you have leadership roles and jobs that are incredibly time consuming and essential to the success of your companies and organizations. Your excellence at these roles and jobs is why you are on the Board of Regents. But because the Board of Regents is a volunteer board, you can only devote so much time to understanding the numerous complex issues that come before the Board.

After reviewing the minutes of your February 20, 2014 meeting where you approved the Sublease to TMT International Observatory, LLC, I do not believe that you were appropriately and adequately briefed. At the time that you approved the Sublease, there were outstanding issues including: 1) the incompleteness of the Environmental Impact Statement which did not sufficiently consider alternative sites, and did not conduct an adequate Cultural Impact Assessment that looks at the cultural impacts of siting the massive TMT on a pivotal place of Hawaiian creation and religion; 2) potential improper management of a State Conservation District; and 3) the likely failure of the State to uphold public trust laws.

Also at your February meeting, questions arose over the years of flawed community consultation. Looking back at the long paper record of meeting minutes, plans, studies, and creation of special designations for Mauna Kea, there has been community opposition to telescopes, and/or unbridled telescope growth all along. As a result of
continued flawed consultation, a great number of people feel distrustful, disrespected and powerless at their own University. Today provides you with a chance to be a body of power that truly listens to the University’s students, alumni, faculty, their families who support them through school and work, and the broader Hawaii community which the University seeks to serve. I hope your actions following this meeting reflect how you have truly listened with your minds and naau today.

I’m sure that other testimony you receive will explain outstanding legal issues, flawed community consultation, and the cultural and religious importance of Mauna Kea in great detail. I’d like to instead address three pro-TMT arguments which are deeply hurtful to me as a Native Hawaiian in the hope that you will see the cultural insensitivity in them and base your future actions on other arguments.

First, TMT’s website MaunakeaandTMT.org informs readers, “The TMT project understands the importance of archaeological and cultural sites found on Maunakea and takes their protection very seriously…In the 2000 Maunakea Science Reserve Master Plan, the northern plateau in Area E was identified as the area chosen for the next observatory location because of its lack of archeological, cultural or biological impact…The selected site has no archaeological shrines or features, no endangered plants, no endangered bugs and no burials.” What TMT International Observatory, LLC and its supporters fail to realize is that the archaeological sites on Mauna Kea are not isolated sacred structures on regular land. They are manmade testaments to the sacredness of Mauna Kea surrounding and above them. The lack of archaeological sites at the summit where the TMT is slated likely shows that the area is so sacred that even our ancestors didn’t go there or build there. It’s the same reason that I never visited Mauna Kea while living in Hilo. It was not my place or purpose to go there. I served no function to Mauna Kea by being physically there, and thus I appreciated Mauna Kea’s beauty and asked for Mauna Kea’s guidance from the makai areas where we live, work and play.

Second, I expect that you will receive testimony that speaks of a long tradition of Hawaiian navigators and scientists, or quotes King Kalakaua’s statement of the pride he felt in 1874 that his “kingdom [could] add its quota toward the successful accomplishment of the most important astronomical observation of the present century and assist, however humbly, the enlightened nations of the earth in these costly enterprises…”, to convince you that allowing the TMT to be built on Mauna Kea is in alignment with Hawaiian principles, leaders and culture. Please do not fall into this insulting trap. In 1974 when Kalakaua stated his support for a British expedition of astronomers to Hawaii, he controlled who could go to Mauna Kea, he controlled what they could do there, he controlled Hawaii’s land and water, he had full and complete jurisdiction over the nation state of Hawaii. Thirteen years later, under the threat of armed militia, the 1887 Bayonet Constitution stripped the King of personal authority and
vested the largely foreign legislature and cabinet with control of Hawaii. We all know the events that followed – the 1893 illegal overthrow of the Kingdom by anti-monarchical insurgents of largely United States citizenship, Queen Liliuokalani’s unheard pleas to rightfully restore her sovereignty, annexation, and statehood. To assert that Kalakaua or other great Hawaiian leaders would support the Thirty Meter Telescope on Mauna Kea in 2015’s political reality adds insult to injury.

Third, I also expect that you will hear testimony from people who are not Native Hawaiian who argue that the ancestors of present day Native Hawaiians would support the TMT. Please know that statements like this break my heart, and I’m guessing similarly affect many of my Native Hawaiian cousins and friends before you today. All people of Hawaii – not just Native Hawaiians – have a right to share their vision for Mauna Kea. But, Hawaiian ancestors are not an amorphous unknown group – core to Hawaiian tradition is our knowledge of our mookuauhau, our family lineage. Native Hawaiians have an exceptional and intimate knowledge and continuing relationship with our ancestors. We know their names, their chants, their stories, and the values that they lived each day. This is an ancestral knowledge and relationship that is personal to each ohana. For anybody outside of an ohana to assert how an ohana’s kupuna would feel or act if they were alive today shows an utter lack of Hawaiian cultural understanding, sensitivity and respect. Please show your kindness and aloha for Native Hawaiian families and their ancestors by not adopting this argument as your own.

We are here today, Native Hawaiians, and those who love this land and culture. We are the descendants of those great Hawaiian leaders, navigators, kahuna, and perpetuators of Hawaiian traditions, values and stories. Though you can’t ask our ancestors how they feel about the TMT, there is good news – you can ask us. Rescind your sublease to TMT International Observatory, LLC.

To those in the audience, on the streets, or on Mauna Kea who stand in protection of Mauna Kea, mahalo for your voices, time away from your jobs and ohana, and aloha. Let this commitment to aloha aina seed, sprout and flourish in every moku and ahupuaa.

Aloha Aina,

Laura Hokunani Edmunds Kaakua, J.D.

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