ON POLITICS

Ige's plan for Mauna Kea raises many questions
By Richard Borreca

Who knew what Mauna Kea needs was one more commission? That is a major part of the prescription being offered by Gov. David Ige, who two months ago asked for a halt in construction atop the mountain.

Because the mountain plays a significant role in traditional stories of the creation of the Hawaiian people, it has been a focal point for cultural observations.

At the same time, a coalition of scientific interests has spent seven years planning and filing the needed permits to build on Mauna Kea what would be the largest telescope on Earth: the Thirty Meter Telescope International Observatory.

Two months ago, as protesters blocked the summit road, Ige said he wanted to meet in closed-door sessions with the interested parties.

This week, he came back to say that, yes, TMT could go forward because it has obeyed all the rules for the construction, and, yes, protesters could protest as long as the state can "ensure the public safety and the right to use our roads for lawful purposes."

All that is just a restating of the obvious; the only difference is Ige now wants some unspecified bureaucracy to mellow everything out.

Ige announced that a Mauna Kea Cultural Council would be created to work with the University of Hawaii Board of Regents, the state Department of Land and Natural Resources and the Governor's Office.
This group will review all leases, review all proposed rules affecting the mountain, especially those relating to access, and consider leasing portions of the mountain to cultural groups.

Although Ige's communications officers said he was in a rush when he made the announcement and didn't clarify the announcement, it appears that the new super cultural committee would be in addition to the existing Office of Mauna Kea Management (http://www.malamamaunakea.org).

There is already an approved "comprehensive management plan" dripping with subcommittee plans for taking down telescopes, public access and management of natural and cultural resources.

And there is already a cultural resource committee, called Kahu Ku Mauna, to help with Hawaiian cultural matters.

The new Ige culture committee would also have the dicey job of enforcing Ige's wish that "anyone going on the mountain must receive training in the cultural aspects of the mountain and how to be respectful to the cultural areas."

Folks from the Big Island might be thinking of a Hilo tradition of marching all the kids up the mountain during snowfalls to play in the chilly white stuff.

"I've been taking my family up for 25 years. We have a blast," said Preston Mendoza, a Hilo truck driver.

"From when I was young," he added, "I was taught the mountain was sacred and to stay away from the places where people pray, and I have taught my kids that, but anyone who wants and can be respectful of the mountain should be able to go."

Asked about the powers of the new culture council, Ige was vague, saying, "We are working on those details; specifically, I am working with the department (DLNR) so as we identify people to serve."

And asked if the new council would somehow get the power to halt construction or change the plans, Ige said, "We will be working through the specific details and when we have them, we will make that announcement."
Like much of the Ige administration so far, this new plan has been done in the dark, so the public has no idea if the governor is reaching for the stars or a star chamber.

*Richard Borreca writes on politics on Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays. Reach him at rborreca@staradvertiser.com.*