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Montana State University 2005

May 6, 2008

Dr. Henry Yang
Chair, Board of Directors
TMT Observatory Corporation
1200 E. California Blvd.
Mail Code 102-8
Pasadena, CA 91125

Dear Chancellor Yang,

Thank you for your letter of April 10 on behalf of the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT) Board. I have distributed the letter to the AURA Board, the Observatory Council, and posted it on the AURA web site. I referenced the letter at the outset of our recent Annual Meeting and provided hard copies to several Member Reps who were unable to access it on the website. A general discussion of the Giant Segmented Mirror Telescope (GSMT) prospects was also held with our Decadal Survey Steering Committee. Despite this, I am cognizant that much more engagement is needed. These are complex issues that require substantially more and broader interaction within AURA and within the community. To this end I very much welcome your invitation to increase the dialogue.

I and AURA are strongly committed to achieving the goals of the last Decadal Survey and providing community access to a Giant Segmented Mirror Telescope. It is significant that consortia like TMT and the Giant Magellan Telescope (GMT), have exercised leadership and made such substantial progress. I and all the elements of AURA want these efforts to succeed and we will look for opportunities to contribute.

The joint statement by NSF, AURA, TMT and GMT issued in January, 2007 lays out a clear mandate for AURA as national Program Manager for GSMT. We take that as call to be proactive in developing the best possible case for GSMT for the upcoming Decadal Survey, and providing a clear set of criteria for decision making. Surely, this will entail a common and transparent understanding of costs during the full life cycle. I anticipate that we will need to work together to make sure that this can be accomplished.

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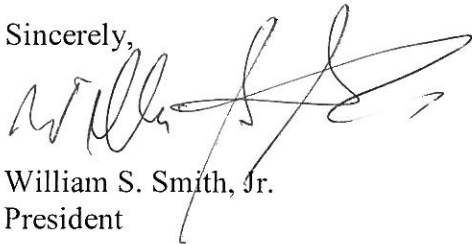
We also believe that the community support for GSMT must be coupled to a consensus that an ensemble of telescopes at all apertures are accessible both for sustaining the community and for developing observing programs for a GSMT. Finally, NOAO will need to have the resources to provide direct support for GSMT and to develop a community of public users.

Our goal is to advocate strong public participation in GSMT as we approach the next Decadal Survey, and to establish a clear basis for forming a direct partnership. There is no question that this partnership must be coupled to a Federal budgetary commitment and we are working with NSF to develop a common understanding of the timing, magnitude and form of this commitment.

You have specifically recommended that we examine carefully the merits and feasibility of advocating support for two large US telescopes in the context of the upcoming Decadal Survey. Although we believe it is neither practical nor prudent to recommend a "down-select" prior to the Decadal Survey, we and the community clearly need to understand the level of Federal resources that will be possible, the actual status and cost of the two projects, and our perception of the community needs for an appropriate level of access in order to go forward from that point. In addition the Decadal Survey itself may re-examine the overall priority of ground based projects and AURA will need to be responsive to any such recommendations. The objectives and rules for a competitive down select process would need to be developed in light of these factors.

Once again, thank you for your letter and the progress the TMT project has made. I anticipate that we will need to increase our level of dialog over the next several years through the Decadal Survey process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "William S. Smith, Jr.", written over a white background.

William S. Smith, Jr.
President