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Thirty Meter Telescope Gets Small Grant to Make Big Plans

By **Yudhijit Bhattacharjee** Mar. 19, 2013 , 5:30 PM

The Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT), a giant observatory that astronomers hope to build by the end of this decade, is expected to cost at least \$1 billion. So a grant of \$1.25 million may seem miniscule. Nonetheless, the backers of TMT are viewing a new 5-year, \$250,000-per-year grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF) as a significant milestone.

Until a few years ago, planners of TMT and its rival project in the United States—the 24.5-meter Giant Magellan Telescope (GMT) were hoping to get the U.S. government to bear a sizable portion of their respective project costs. But in December 2011, **NSF announced that there was no money available to support construction of either project until the mid-2020s**. However, NSF put out a solicitation for proposals offering \$1.25 million for the development of a public-private partnership plan that could lead to the construction of a large telescope, should NSF be able to provide funds in the future.

The GMT partnership, which is led by the Carnegie Observatories and other institutions, announced in April that it **would not make a bid** for the NSF grant. That effectively left TMT as the sole contender for the NSF award. TMT announced on Sunday that it had been awarded the grant.