

PUKALANI – The brand-spanking new Advanced Technology Research Center for the University of Hawaii Institute for Astronomy will help the IfA reach to the stars – and to the community on Maui, astronomer J.D. Armstrong said.

And also, to the sun. Much of its work will be on solar astronomy.

Dedicated on Friday, the 15,000-square-foot structure christened Maikalani (meaning from the heavens) will not only expand opportunities for research and development, it will allow scientists to provide public programs and to expand opportunities at Maui Community College.

State Sen. Rosalyn “Roz” Baker, who spoke at the event, said she was impressed by the facility.

“It’s such an asset for the program here, as well as the island. It’s another part of our effort to provide really good jobs for our local residents,” Baker told The Maui News.



Those attending the dedication of the 15,000-square-foot Maikalani Advanced Technology Research Center take in the exhibits at the UH astronomy research center, which will also have public programs.

The Maui News / MATTHEW THAYER photo

Baker, chairwoman of the Senate’s Ways and Means Committee, said the state put in \$8 million toward the \$10 million cost of the center.

Members of her committee will be visiting Maui in the next few weeks, when they also will get to tour the center.

Mayor Charmaine Tavares, who also spoke at the program, echoed Baker's sentiments.

"This represents not just greater opportunities in technology for Maui, but hope and motivation for our youth who left the island to become educated in these high-technology fields," Tavares told The Maui News on Sunday.

"By strengthening our technology infrastructure we gain a larger window of opportunity for those that want to return home but have been unable to find work in the astronomy and related fields – this is an important benefit the center gives to our community."

Haleakala Amateur Astronomers President Rob Ratkowski was also enthused.

"I think it's a great new facility," he said.



Kainalu Ball, 4, peers into a telescope with an assist from Rob Ratkowski

The Maui News / MATTHEW THAYER photo

Ratkowski and members of the amateur group brought their telescopes to the dedication to give the public a glimpse of the stars.

Ratkowski was encouraged by the youngsters who were captivated and curious about what they saw.

Although the Haleakala Amateur Astronomers club assists the IfA with educational outreach, the new center will now allow for more public outreach programs by the IfA.

"We're becoming more serious about education and outreach so we can work with the community. Hopefully, we can participate with the community in understanding the opportunities in science," said Armstrong, who is also technical education and outreach director for the UH astronomy program.

He said the center has space for researchers on Maui to schedule regular presentations on the work being performed on Haleakala. The observatories on the Haleakala summit cannot provide public tours, but the research center 8,000 feet down the slopes can offer programs to explain the work being performed at 10,000 feet.

"We're starting up a series of public talks, once a month, so the scientists can explain what we're doing to anyone who shows up," Armstrong said.

The old IfA Maui office building at Waiakoa was a former farmhouse that had been used as a goat barn before it was converted into an office complex. The wood-frame building was serviceable but had sagging floors, streaks of light shining through walls and ancient electrical systems.

"There was a certain charm to the barn, but we like this building," Armstrong said.

The new facility on a two-acre site at Kulamalu includes a laboratory that will allow the research teams associated with IfA to develop new systems through microfabrication for optical and infrared sensing. The facilities also are digitally linked to the Maui High Performance Computing Center in Kihei as well as to the summit observatories, allowing for expansion of research and development projects in remote sensing, according to IfA officials.

There is room for classes and training programs as well, Armstrong said.

"We're planning on using the facilities to work with Maui Community College in training new engineers and scientists," he said. "It will be technical, mechanical-based training, but we are looking at the possibility of partnering with MCC for students to get four-year degrees in engineering fields."

Described as a significant addition to the technology infrastructure on Maui, Maikalani also has enough land around it for future growth.

■ Staff Writer Melissa Tanji contributed to this report.