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In Nevada, clock may mark the passing of millenniums

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Talk about taking the long view.

An influential group of futurists led by Whole Earth Catalog creator Stewart Brand has plans to build a "millennium clock" in the Nevada desert that would run for 10,000 years and become one of Earth's great monuments like the Pyramids or Stonehenge. The project would also be accompanied by a library that would be a repository for cultural and scientific treasures for eons.

The clock, designed by computer entrepreneur Danny Hillis, vice president for research and development at The Walt Disney Co., would tick twice a day, turning ordinary weeks into geological seconds, and sound chimes to mark passing years, centuries and millenniums.

The idea, said Brand, is to change humankind's perspective on time -- to focus attention beyond election years, business quarters, even centuries. "The year 2000 is not the end of anything," he said. "It's just the middle of civilization's story."

"Ideally, this would do for thinking about time what the photographs of Earth from space have done for thinking about the environment," said Brand. "Such icons reframe the way people think."

Brand said he and his colleagues have tentative plans to put the clock and library on a scenic, wind-swept mountain slope near Great Basin National Park in eastern Nevada, where they have recently purchased property. But no formal decision will be made until after the idea is presented to area residents in early September, he said.

"A lot will depend on the impact from the community," said Alexander Rose, executive director of The Longnow Foundation, which is spearheading the project.

"If this is welcomed, that will have a huge impact on moving us forward."

Many in the largely rural, remote county have yet to hear of the project. But some who have are positive.

"Initially, I was skeptical," said Denys Koyle, owner of The Border Inn, a motel near Great Basin National Park where Brand and his colleagues have stayed while evaluating the site. "But I've come around. I understand what they're doing and why they're doing it. This isn't as crazy an idea as it sounds."

"A little more social and economic activity around here couldn't hurt," said Jo Anne Garrett, a resident of Baker, population 150. "It seems like an interesting and thought-provoking project."

Brand, who has made a career out of surfing societal waves -- from the counterculture to cyberspace -- has surrounded himself with impressive company.

The board of the Longnow Foundation includes, among others, Mitchell Kapor, founder of Lotus Development Corp.; Roger Kennedy, former director of the U.S. National Park Service from 1993 to 1997; Michael Keller, head of the Stanford Libraries; and Paul Saffo, director of the Institute for the Future.

"Stewart (Brand) is a very interesting and imaginative thinker who is miles and years ahead of the rest of us," said John Livermore, a prominent Nevada geologist who visited the site recently with Brand. "He's a fascinating guy and is always thinking up new things."

Under current plans, the timepiece would be housed underground on the western flank of the Snake Mountains -- a region dotted by groves of bristlecone pine trees, which can live 4,000 years or more.

The site was chosen, in part, for its aridity and aesthetics.

"Water is the enemy of anything lasting," said Brand. And the expansive views, he said, are majestic. "It gives you a great long perspective, every direction you look."

The millennium clock is peculiar in more ways than one. For starters, it would have to be wound up. "There are no electronics, whatsoever. We felt it had to have human input or it would lose its relevance," said Rose. "It could be wound by the weight of the people who visit it. Everyone would become its caretaker.

"If you look at things like the Pyramids and Stonehenge, which didn't really require any input from people, they quickly lose their relevance."

The clock would also take centuries to construct. "If it's built in a single generation, it will only have relevance to that generation. Projects like the cathedrals in Europe that take several hundred years to build seem to have much longer lasting relevance," Rose said.

The display feature would also be out of the ordinary. Brand described it like this:

"You look at a ring of years on the face that rotate around and you see the year 2000 coming up. And just a little further around is the year 3000, then 4000 and on up to 12,000."

But to many, the library project is even more intriguing.

"The digitalization of everything is making information tremendously ephemeral," said Brand. "It's quite a serious problem. There's a chapter in my book (The Clock of the Long and Now, Basic Books, 1999) about it called 'Ending the Digital Dark Age.' Librarians are having to rethink what they do, quite a lot."

No permanent solution has been found, but Brand and his foundation are looking at new technology that can record extremely large amounts of data on small, circular "Rosetta disks." Information would be stored in 2,100 world languages, he said.



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