

January 9, 2007

The Oklahoman (Oklahoma City, OK)

Long-term view touted by group

By David Zizzo, Staff Writer

Thousands of years from now, when yet another century begins, deep inside a mountain in Nevada a clock will chime. At least, that's what Danny Hillis hopes. It will take millions of dollars to build this dream, said Hillis, a computer scientist living in Los Angeles. And unlike a Magic Mountain-type of tourist destination, this one will be far off the beaten path. It will require a hike to reach. This project, Hillis said, is strictly for the ages, to nudge civilization's focus more toward the long term rather than the immediate, the now. That's the idea behind The Long Now Foundation, a San Francisco-based organization Hillis co-founded to "provide counterpoint to today's 'faster/cheaper' mind-set and promote 'slower/better' thinking," according to the group's Web site. The centerpiece of the foundation will be the "Clock of the Long Now," lovingly dubbed by its designers the "world's slowest computer." Hillis came up with the idea and helped design the clock intended to run on its own for 10,000 years. A prototype is in the Science Museum in London. A clock is an ancient machine that "has a life of its own," Hillis said. "To me, the fascination is that it can last much longer than an individual life can." Clocks and counters of all kinds help people keep track of things, coordinate schedules and relate activities and life to time, he said. It's an intuitive device that helps us understand many things. Hillis doesn't care much for countdown timers, though. "It feels like lighting a fuse," he said. "I much more like the clocks that are very open-ended, that can keep going forever," he said. A clock is a metaphor for life, he said. "Our heart beats, and the clock ticks, and somehow if you just keep winding it, it keeps ticking. We ourselves exist in time according to this mystery of time, and somehow a clock is our connection to this mystery." Besides the question of how to power Hillis' 10,000-year clock, the idea has raised more philosophical questions. Since hardly anything survives thousands of years unless -- like the Dead Sea Scrolls -- it is lost, perhaps the clock should be hidden, he said. Professional magician Teller suggested not even building one, just making a documentary saying you did and that you hid it. That way, the legend would live on about such a clock. "It sort of says something about what the point of it is," Hillis said. "The real value of it is just the idea of it." Copyright 2007 The Oklahoman, All Rights Reserved