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States Compete for Spaceports

From: Steven L. Wilson Sr <Ndunlks@aol.com>
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States Compete for Spaceports

.c The Associated Press

By PAULINE ARRILLAGA

FREEPORT, Texas (AP) -- When Fred Welch surveys 1,000 acres of prairie near the Texas coast, he thinks not of the land before him but of the stars above.

Welch has a vision for this stretch of soil about an hour south of Houston. He sees a spaceport, with rocketships coming and going as easily as 747s at an airport.

It's a vision shared by Andy Poole in Montana and William Dettmer in New Mexico, who both have several thousand of acres available.

They all are competitors in a new space race, where the prize is a slice of a multibillion-dollar industry -- launching cargo into orbit -- that could provide thousands of jobs and create a new hub in the next era of space transportation.

"This will just be the start of a space enterprise -- a new Canaveral, so to speak," says Dettmer, chairman of the New Mexico Space Commission.

"A lot of states are trying to get into the wave of the future. If you have it, we believe people will come -- like a field of dreams."

Spaceports would be home to reusable space vehicles intended to launch telecommunications satellites and other freight at a fraction of today's cost: \$1,000 a pound compared with the current \$10,000 a pound.

The so-called space planes would feature more efficient engines, lighter fuel tanks and more durable thermal insulation than today's launch vehicles. More importantly, they would have no throwaway parts -- saving money and turnaround time.

Today's space shuttles discard fuel tanks and rocket boosters. Every time a shuttle launches, for example, the external fuel tank and two solid-fuel rocket boosters are discarded. The boosters are recovered and used again, but only after costly refurbishment.

With an estimated 1,700 satellites being prepared for launch over the next decade, at least six private companies are

designing reusable space planes that they hope will become the transportation system of choice in the 21st century.

If the vehicles work as well as hoped, they could ferry supplies to the International Space Station and eventually replace the shuttle.

"We have to at least start demonstrating technology leading to a vehicle that could reduce the cost of getting into space," says Jim Cast, a spokesman for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

Of the reusable vehicles under development, probably the best-known is Lockheed Martin's VentureStar, a wedge-shaped spaceship designed to lift more than 50,000 pounds of payload into orbit.

In 1996, NASA awarded the company a \$900 million contract to build a half-scale prototype known as the X-33, scheduled for test flights next year. If all goes well, VentureStar could be in operation by 2004.

In all, 15 states are pitching 31 potential sites for spaceports to serve as homes for VentureStar. Besides Texas, Montana and New Mexico, they are Arizona, California, Florida, Idaho, Louisiana, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Utah, Virginia and Washington.

Lockheed Martin plans to choose two sites late next year.

"Whoever establishes itself as the commercial space transportation hub, it's going to be the major place of operations for decades to come," says Tom Moser, a former NASA executive who heads the Texas Aerospace Commission.

With three Texas sites under consideration, Welch -- who heads an economic development group in the Freeport area -- is working with Moser and officials from the other sites to obtain \$1.3 million from the Legislature to help the state compete.

They also are pushing legislation that would allow a county or city to create an economic authority to foster spaceport development.

In Montana, legislators have exempted VentureStar from business equipment taxes and provided funds toward spaceport infrastructure, says Poole, deputy director of the state Commerce Department.

New Mexico has set aside millions of dollars to obtain land and conduct environmental studies should it be chosen as a site.

Several states, including Florida and California, already have licensed, commercial spaceports. But because vehicles such as VentureStar would have no expendable parts, they don't have to take off from coastal launch pads.

That, says Dettmer, gives inland states with little or no space industry presence a chance to break into the market.

"As we move from government space into commercial space, we're looking at a whole new paradigm, and I think a lot of states are interested in latching onto that," he says.

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