Change for NASA: Renting the Right Stuff

(AP) -- Getting to space is about to be outsourced.

The Obama administration on Monday will propose in its new budget spending billions of dollars to encourage private companies to build, launch and operate spacecraft for NASA and others. Uncle Sam would buy its astronauts a ride into space just like hopping in a taxi.

The idea is that getting astronauts into orbit, which NASA has been doing for 49 years, is getting to be so old hat that someone other than the government can do it. It's no longer really the Right Stuff. Going private would free the space agency to do other things, such as explore beyond Earth's orbit, do more research and study the Earth with better satellites. And it would spur a new generation of private companies - even some with Internet roots - to innovate.

But there's some concern about that - from former NASA officials worried about safety and from congressional leaders worried about lost jobs. Some believe space is still a tough, dangerous enterprise not to be left to private companies out for a buck. Government would lose vital knowledge and control, critics fear.

Proponents of private space, an idea that has been kicking around for nearly 20 years, point to the airline industry in its infancy. Initially the Army flew most planes. But private companies eventually started building and operating aircraft, especially when they got a guaranteed customer in the U.S. government to deliver air mail.

That's what NASA would be: a guaranteed customer to ferry astronauts to the International Space Station through 2020. It would be similar to the few years that

NASA paid Russia to fly astronauts on its Soyuz after the Columbia accident in 2003.

"With a $6 billion program you can have multiple winners. You'll literally have your Blackberry, your iPhone and your Android phone all competing for customers in the marketplace," said John Gedmark, executive director of the Commercial Spaceflight Federation. The White House has said it will be adding $5.9 billion to the overall NASA budget over five years; Gedmark believes most or all will go to commercial space.

Mike Gold, corporate counsel at Bigelow Aerospace, which is building the first commercial space station and is a potential spacecraft provider, believes the government should have privatized astronaut launchings decades ago.

"It will force the aerospace world to become competitive again and restore us to our glory days," Gold said.

Last year as part of the stimulus package, NASA said it would give out $50 million in seed and planning money for the idea of a commercial spaceship. Several firms expressed interest and NASA will soon pick a winner or winners.

American University public policy professor and space expert Howard McCurdy said this is not as radical as it seems. The shuttle was built not by government workers but by Rockwell International, a private company. Then in 1996 the Clinton administration outsourced the shuttle's day-to-day launch and other operations to a private company.

"This is something that NASA has been drifting toward in the last 25 years," McCurdy said.

But the Aerospace Safety Advisory Panel, created after NASA's first fatal accident, warned that the existing private rockets are not rated by the government as safe for people to fly on. That has to be addressed with testing and study before jumping into commercial space, the panel said.

It's not that it is impossible to certify these rockets as safe enough for astronauts but it is a long process that is not spelled out, said former NASA associate administrator Scott Pace, now a space policy professor at George Washington University.

Peter Diamandis, founder of the X Prize Foundation, which sponsored a competition in suborbital spaceflight, dismissed safety worries: "We don't fly on U.S. Air Government. We fly on Southwest and JetBlue."

The Federal Aviation Administration, which has a commercial space division, would regulate private space safety and other issues.

Pace cautioned that Clinton era efforts to privatize parts of the National Reconnaissance Organization, which builds and operates U.S. spy satellites, as a failure and this could be similar. He added that there's such strong support in

Congress for the current space program a change may be difficult to get through Capitol Hill.

New York University government professor Paul Light said: "My general caution is be careful about what you give away. It's awful expensive to get it back."

But there should be a lot of interest in giving astronauts the ride if the price is right, Gedmark said.

The leading contenders - most are mum at this point - to build private spaceships include established aerospace giants, such as Boeing Co. of Chicago and Lockheed Martin of Bethesda, Md., which built most of America's rockets and capsules. Boeing and Lockheed Martin have existing rocket families in Delta and Atlas, which launch commercial and government satellites regularly and reliably, but for the moment aren't rated by the government to be safe enough for humans. That may change.

But it's the newer space guard that brings some excitement to the field. PayPal founder Elon Musk may be ahead of most. His SpaceX already has a Falcon rocket and Dragon capsule. Other companies being mentioned include Orbital Sciences of Dulles, Va., Bigelow Aerospace of Las Vegas and Sierra Nevada Corp. of Sparks, Nev.

In the 1980s, Tiffany Montague grew up wanting to get into space and figured she had to work for the government to do that. She joined the Air Force and was a high-altitude pilot. But now she works for Google, running a $30 million prize to encourage private companies to build a rover that can run around the moon.

"We're broadly interested in opening up space to everyone," Montague said in a phone interview Friday. She said Google is "supportive of commercial spaceflight, we're enthusiasts. But we're not space entrepreneurs - at least not yet. Who knows what we might do in the future."

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