Boeing brings space taxi jobs to Florida

Irene Klotz, Reuters

Boeing Co will bring hundreds of jobs to Florida by basing a program to develop passenger spaceships at the Kennedy Space Center, first for NASA and later for commercial use, officials said on Monday.

Boeing's plans will ease some of the pain over thousands of job losses in the so-called Space Coast region of central Florida from the end of NASA's space shuttle program earlier this year.

Boeing will ramp up its workforce to about 550 by 2015 to make, test and operate the seven-passenger spaceships, called CST-100s, said John Mulholland, vice president and program manager of commercial programs for Boeing Space Exploration.

"Florida's selection made sense because of the skilled local workforce, the outstanding facilities and the proximity of our NASA customer," he said at a ceremony at the former space shuttle processing hangar where the new venture will be based.

The company currently employs about 200 people on the CST-100 program nationwide, including 30 in Florida.

Space Florida, a state-backed agency working to expand space-related businesses, is a partner in the project, serving as Boeing's landlord.

"If anyone had any doubts that Kennedy Space Center would remain open for business, this agreement allowing Space Florida to lay the groundwork for a world-class commercial space industry here should put that notion to rest," said NASA deputy administrator Lori Garver.

The Obama administration is requesting $850 million for the fiscal year that began October 1 to invest in commercial passenger spaceships.

With the shuttle fleet's retirement, the United States is dependent on Russia to fly astronauts to the International Space Station, a $100 billion project of 16 nations that orbits 240 miles above Earth.

"The next era of space exploration won't wait, and so we can't wait for Congress to do its job and give our space program the funding it needs," President Barack Obama said in a statement.

SPACE LEADERSHIP

"That's why my administration will be pressing forward, in partnership with Space Florida and the private sector, to create jobs and make sure America continues to

lead the world in exploration and discovery."

Under the agreement, Space Florida will take over maintenance and operations of the Orbiter Processing Facility Bay 3 from NASA. The shuttle hangars are among dozens of specialized shuttle facilities at the Kennedy Space Center that the U.S. government no longer needs.

Space Florida, which is structured to partner with a wide range of entities including federal and local agencies, research institutes and commercial companies, plans to invest up to about $50 million in the Boeing project, agency President Frank DiBello said.

"There could well be access to financing beyond that, depending on the nature of the work to be done," DiBello told reporters. "We are making these capital investments in return for job creation, which is an economic benefit to the state."

Boeing's project, however, is dependent on congressional support of NASA's Commercial Crew program, which is partly funding the CST-100 work, and on winning an upcoming NASA contract to continue the spaceship's development.

Boeing is one of four firms receiving NASA funds to develop space taxis. The others are:

* Space Exploration Technologies, a privately owned company founded and overseen by Internet entrepreneur Elon Musk;

* Sierra Nevada Corp, which is working on a winged space plane that resembles the shuttle;

* Blue Origin, a startup company owned by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos.

Turning over transportation to and from the space station to private firms is designed to free up NASA money for a heavy-lift rocket and deep-space capsule that can travel to asteroids, the moon and other destinations beyond the station.

Russia currently charges NASA about $350 million a year for space flight services.

(Editing by Tom Brown)

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