

Spaceship builder setting up shop in Florida

Irene Klotz, Reuters

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla., Aug 23 - XCOR Aerospace, one of a handful of U.S. firms developing suborbital spaceships, plans to build its vehicles and fly tourists, researchers and commercial payloads from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, officials announced on Thursday.

The privately owned firm, currently based in Mojave, California, is developing a two-seat suborbital space plane called Lynx that is expected to debut by early 2013.

The company expects to fly four times daily, at a cost of \$95,000 per person. The Lynx flights are similar to rides being offered aboard SpaceShipTwo, a six-passenger, two-pilot vehicle owned by Virgin Galactic, a U.S. offshoot of Richard Branson's London-based Virgin Group.

Virgin Galactic, which is selling rides for \$200,000 per person, plans to fly from a new spaceport outside Las Cruces, New Mexico. Its first vehicle is undergoing testing in Mojave by manufacturer Scaled Composites, a subsidiary of Northrop Grumman.

Both spacecraft take off horizontally --- Lynx by its own engines and SpaceShipTwo from beneath a carrier aircraft -- then rocket themselves about 63 miles above the planet's surface before plunging back through the atmosphere.

The thrill ride gives fliers a few minutes to float in microgravity and a view of the Earth set against the blackness of space.

XCOR intends to fly Lynx from California, as well as Florida and several other sites around the world, primarily in partnership with companies and space agencies, similar to how airline manufacturers lease planes and pilots under so-called "wet lease" agreements.

NASA SHUTTLE FACILITY

XCOR evaluated several sites before settling on Florida. It was wooed in part by more than \$4 million in state and local economic incentives and a skilled technical workforce idled by the end of NASA's space shuttle program last year.

The proposed site, to be located at the Shuttle Landing Facility, would include a hangar, flight operations center, manufacturing and assembly plants and a center to support space flight participants.

XCOR said it hopes to open its KSC site in October 2014. The company expects to employ about 150 engineers and technicians by the end of 2018, said chief operating officer Andrew Nelson.

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Commercial suborbital spaceflights are expected to bring in between \$600 million and \$1.6 billion in revenue within a decade after the start of operations, a recent study commissioned by the U.S. government and the state of Florida shows.

"When you have a vehicle like Lynx flying you can expect to see technology clusters around it," Nelson told community leaders and guests at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex on Thursday, where the Florida expansion was announced.

In the wake of the shuttles' retirement, NASA is in the midst of transforming its Florida launch site to handle a variety of government, commercial and military space and aviation projects.

XCOR previously announced it was moving its corporate headquarters and setting up a research and development center in Midland, Texas, lured in part by \$10 million in financial incentives.

XCOR's agreement with NASA to use the Shuttle Landing Facility is still pending, said Frank DiBello, president of Space Florida, a state-backed economic agency that is brokering the deal and contributing \$3 million to the project.

(Editing by Tom Brown and Anthony Boadle)

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