

## **Florida wants NASA land to develop commercial spaceport**

Irene Klotz, Reuters

(Reuters) - With an eye toward developing a commercial spaceport, Florida has asked NASA to transfer 150 acres of land north of the shuttle launch pads and the shuttle runway to Space Florida, the state's aerospace development agency.

"Florida believes that the properties identified in this request are excess to the needs of the U.S. government," Lieutenant Governor Jennifer Carroll, who is also chairwoman of Space Florida, wrote in letter to NASA chief Charles Bolden and Ray LaHood, secretary of Department of Transportation, which oversees commercial space transportation in the United States.

The letter, dated September 20, was posted on the state's Sunburst public records website.

A week earlier, Space Florida agreed to spend \$2.3 million for environmental studies, land surveys, title searches, appraisals and other activities to lay the groundwork for Cape Canaveral Spaceport, a proposed state-owned commercial complex that would be licensed by the Federal Aviation Administration and operated like an airport.

"If we want to be satisfied with 10 to 12 government launches a year, I don't have to do anything," Space Florida president and chief executive Frank DiBello told Reuters.

But he said those launches would likely end when commercial sites elsewhere are able to offer affordable rates.

"What has existed for decades has been good, but the marketplace has been largely governmental. What commercial market there was, we have essentially lost overseas. I'm not only anxious to bring some of that back, but I'm anxious for the next-generation of providers, both the launch companies and the satellite owner-operators, to have Florida be the place where they seek to do business," DiBello said.

Similar commercial spaceports have been set up in New Mexico, where Virgin Galactic, an offshoot of Richard Branson's Virgin Group, plans to fly a fleet of suborbital passenger spaceships, as well as Alaska, Virginia and California.

Commercial space launches from Cape Canaveral Air Force Base in Florida and from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, both of which can accommodate bigger rockets and more diverse payloads than the other sites, are subject to military oversight.

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Florida's request comes as NASA is working to revamp the Kennedy Space Center following the end of the shuttle program last year. It also is timed to woo privately owned Space Exploration Technologies, or SpaceX, to build its third launch site in Florida.

The company, founded and run by Internet entrepreneur Elon Musk, currently flies its Falcon rockets from a refurbished and leased pad at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station. It is preparing to activate a second launch site at Vandenberg before the end of the year and is looking to build a third launch pad in a commercial zone.

Out of a backlog of 42 Falcon 9 flights, worth about \$4 billion, 65 percent are for commercial and non-U.S. government customers, Brian Bjelde, SpaceX director of product and mission management, said at the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics conference in Pasadena, California, earlier this month.

An environmental study of a site in Brownsville, Texas, near the Mexican border, is under way. SpaceX also is looking at sites in Puerto Rico, Hawaii and other states, Bjelde said.

### SHILOH REVISITED

In 1989, Florida proposed building a commercial launch pad north of the space shuttle complex in an area known as Shiloh, an old citrus-growing community that straddles Brevard County to the south and Volusia County to the north.

That initiative was hastily shut down by environmentalists' concerns over scrub jay habitats and other issues.

"This site is not exactly the same. We were going after a lot more land then," DiBello said.

"What we are seeking is a collaborative effort and we want to do that early on so they're all involved and all part of the dialog. This includes the Department of Interior and wildlife and refuge community," DiBello said.

Some of the requested land is believed to be owned by Florida, which lays claim to about 56,000 acres of the 140,000 acres that comprise the Kennedy Space Center and the surrounding Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge.

The federal government was allowed use of the land for the national space program, with the caveat that it would revert back to the state if it was no longer needed for NASA's purposes.

NASA never developed the Shiloh site.

Space Florida already has an agreement with NASA to operate one of the three space shuttle processing hangars.

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DiBello said cost estimates to develop a new launch site at Shiloh were not yet available. Though Space Florida is, in part, a special municipal district, with powers to tax and sell bonds, the agency is not looking at levying taxes for spaceport development, DiBello said.

"Right now we hope that we could keep SpaceX here, but there are others that will be coming into the marketplace, I'm convinced," he said.

(Editing by Jane Sutton)

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