

Spaceport Could have Galactic Effect on Area

By Ryan Anderson
Journal Staff

With growth within the region soaring to new heights, some enterprising officials hope the growth extends to low-earth orbit.

Brazoria County officials have joined the Space Race of the 21st Century in their pursuit of a commercial spaceport where payloads will be sent into earth orbit and beyond.

While the effort to build a spaceport is centered in Brazoria County, should a spaceport be built, the economic impacts would be felt throughout the region.

“A study completed this past summer with the University of Houston at Clear Lake showed an estimated 7,000 jobs would be created from the spaceport alone. The direct impact of over \$300 million dollars annually for purchases of fuel, supplies, security, communications etc. would ripple across the region,” said Fred Welch, executive director of the Brazoria County Partnership. “The benefits for the project will be felt across the region. Any single community in Brazoria, Galveston or Fort Bend County cannot absorb 7,000 new jobs. New homes will be needed. Right now, those new homes are being built in the Northern part of our county.”

The majority of the commercial satellite market is currently handled in Eurasia.

“Right now, many of these satellites are being launched overseas in France and China,” Welch said. “What we are trying to do is recapture this market and bring it back to the United States.”

Although several locations within the United States, including two additional sites in Texas, are vying to be home of a spaceport, proponents of Brazoria County's bid feel they are near the head of the pack.

“Current FAA safety criteria require a sparsely populated area with virtually nothing in front of the launch zone,” Welch said. “That is why Cape Canaveral (where most U.S. launches occur) is on the sea coast. The area around the cape is largely a wildlife management area.”

Welch went on to illustrate another similarity between the launch site at Cape Canaveral, in Florida, and the proposed Brazoria County site.

“If you were to draw a circle around Brevard County (in Florida) the largest community is close to 30 miles from the Cape, kind of like Pearland,” Welch said. “There is adequate access by highway to the launch site as we have in Brazoria County, but there is also a large safety area to prevent injury to anybody should there be a catastrophic event.”

The location of the Brazoria County spaceport would be a 4,000-acre parcel of land in the southeastern part of the county, between Demi Jon Island and Oyster Lake.

Welch cited several reasons for the increased need for launch sites in the future. First, satellites only have a life expectancy of around 8 to 12 years before they run out of fuel and leave orbit.

A second cause for multiple satellite launches is technology changes, and other factors, that make previously launched satellites obsolete.

A third factor leading to the increase in satellite launches, according to Welch, is changing communication technology.

“There is a worldwide demand for increased communications capability due to this thing called the Internet. Therefore, we are in need of additional satellite capability to add more connectivity down here on earth,” Welch said.

Aside from providing jobs at the spaceport, Welch feels it will be a build it and they will come scenario for other space-related industries.

“New industry will locate into the area. The 288 corridor from Pearland to Lake Jackson offers the best location for additional aerospace or satellite manufacturing and service, Welch said. “Houston, with its international airports and many amenities will become the commercial space launch capital of the free world.”

Another benefit of the Brazoria County bid is the proximity of Johnson Space Center.

“Our biggest asset in this project is by far the people in this region. We are blessed with one of the highest concentrations of engineers in the world right here in Houston. Clear Lake has one of the highest concentrations of experts on reusable launch vehicles in the world at the Johnson Space Center,” Welch said.

According to Welch, the benefits of a spaceport in Brazoria County would be felt by a variety of sectors.

“It also makes sense that the manufacturing of satellites closer to the launch site would be more beneficial in the long run. There will be transportation related businesses, operators for the spaceport, payload specialists who will prepare the satellite and place it in the cargo bay,” Welch said. “Tourism should not be overlooked either. What a great compliment to have the nearby Johnson Space Center where you can tour and learn about space exploration and then go a short drive down the coast and witness a launch.”

The spaceport project bid has encountered several obstacles, including the failure to secure state funds for an environmental impact study that is a necessary piece of the bidding puzzle.

Despite the setback, Welch feels it is a matter of when the spaceport will be built rather than if it will be built.

“This is a long-term project and one that we must unite around and commit to if we are to succeed,” Welch said. “It will take three to five years just to gain a license for the facility. Construction will take an additional three to five years. By starting now to license a facility we will be ready when the technology arrives in the next two to three years to engineer, design and construct the world's first commercial RLV launch facility.”