

Cape Breton space launch doesn't hinge on NASA contract, company says

16:07:05 EDT Aug 16, 2006

Canadian Press: JAMES KELLER

HALIFAX (CP) - A space launch facility in Cape Breton will go ahead even if it doesn't win a NASA bid to service the International Space Station, the company behind the project said Wednesday.

PlanetSpace, a partnership between two entrepreneurs in Canada and the U.S., is planning a multimillion-dollar facility that could soon launch astronauts, cargo and even tourists into space. The company was created in response to NASA's request for bids to shuttle cargo and crew to the space station, the two men that formed PlanetSpace said in an interview.

NASA will announce a shortlist of one or more bidders on Friday to develop technology capable of reaching the station.

Neither NASA nor the company will confirm if PlanetSpace is one of the bidders, but chairman Chirinjeev Kathuria said there have been ongoing talks with the U.S. space agency.

"We've been in discussions with NASA to help to build an orbital vehicle to carry crew and cargo," Kathuria said from Chicago. "I think there's a lot of excitement that we're going to be building a manned space program for Canada."

Kathuria said that even if his company isn't on the list of bidders released Friday, there will be other opportunities to work with NASA.

President Geoff Sheerin added that PlanetSpace, which has been testing rockets in Ontario and hopes to be ready for launch in three or four years, wants to capitalize on several areas of commercial space flight.

It plans to launch a space tourism business, charging \$250,000 US per flight from several launch sites, including Cape Breton.

Sheerin said there are other opportunities as well, such as commercial satellite launches.

"One you're able to take crew and cargo to the International Space Station, well you can take people into orbit anyway," he said from London, Ont. "It is definitely right down the middle of the company's focus, which is private space flight."

The project has already received the blessing of the Nova Scotia government.

Nova Scotia Business Inc., a government economic development agency, has agreed to make about 120 hectares of land available for the project. There are currently no talks for government funding.

Agency spokesman Mark James admitted he was skeptical when PlanetSpace first approached the province earlier this year, but he said he was convinced after meeting with the company.

"It's very real," said James. "We're very familiar with the business plan . . . and we're extremely confident this is going to happen."

James said he's convinced the project doesn't hinge on contracts from NASA. He said there are a number of opportunities for commercial space flight, and the province has confidence in the experience of PlanetSpace's founders.

Sheerin started Canadian Arrow for the X Prize, a U.S. competition to build a spacecraft capable of taking people on suborbital flights. He lost, but in the process made the largest liquid propellant rocket engine constructed in Canada.

Kathuria was a founding director of MirCorp, the first company to send a private citizen into space six years ago.

PlanetSpace said the Cape Breton launch site will be along the coast northwest of Sydney, though the details are still being worked out.

The company chose Cape Breton because it lies at approximately the same latitude as Russia's launch facility, the Baikonur Cosmodrome.

Its position on Earth will apparently make trips to the space station more efficient, and launching over the ocean will reduce the risk of space debris falling on land.

Once the company has finalized plans for the launch site, it will need approval from Transport Canada. If that happens, it would be the first company to set up a permanent launch site in the country.

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