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New Mexico's Bet on Space Tourism Hits a Snag



Mark Holm for The New York Times

New Mexico envisioned Spaceport America as the center of a fledgling industry where tourists would pay large sums to take suborbital flights.

By DAN FROSCH

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TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES, N.M — Somewhere off a dusty road in southern New Mexico sits a hulking horseshoe-crab-shaped structure and a two-mile-long slab of concrete flanked by mesas and mountains.

Enlarge This Image



Pool photo by Jim Campbell

SpaceShipOne came in for a landing in 2004 in Mojave, Calif. Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic will be the spaceport's anchor tenant for 20 years.

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Mark Holm for The New York Times

Construction of Spaceport America's 110,000-square-foot hangar and terminal is nearing completion in southern New Mexico.

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Welcome to Spaceport America, the country's first facility built specifically for commercial space travel — an endeavor that the state envisioned as the epicenter of a fledgling industry where tourists would pay large sums to take suborbital flights into space.

These days, though, after years of planning and debate, New Mexico's grand ambitions for Spaceport have come down to earth, its future entwined with the state's struggling economy. Though more than 400 people have put down flight deposits totaling more than \$55 million, it is still not exactly clear when the first flight will launch.

In her first two months in office, Gov. Susana Martinez removed the Spaceport's supervising board, pushed out its executive director and began a review of the project's finances, saying the Spaceport needed more robust private investment.

Ms. Martinez, a Republican, was elected on a promise of paring government, and the state's revenue windfall is long gone. The governor has since made a point of stating her

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Mark Holm for The New York Times

It is still not exactly clear when the first flight will launch from Spaceport America, in the Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico.



support for the project, and this month she appointed a new board, including three former members and Sid Gutierrez, a former astronaut. But she has also vowed to privatize the Spaceport, saying taxpayers have already paid their fair share.

“The Spaceport is part of the plan for economic development in New Mexico, and the voters made it clear they support it,” Ms. Martinez said in a recent interview. “We want to be a leader in space exploration, but we want to do it within our budget.”

The dream of a commercial spaceport has been around for years in New Mexico, which has long had a love affair with aerospace and aliens. Back in 2006, flush with oil and gas revenue, the Legislature, pushed by Gov. [Bill Richardson](#), approved \$132 million to build the Spaceport.

Standing to reap the benefits if the project succeeds, voters in Doña Ana and Sierra Counties passed a quarter-cent sales tax, which will provide the remaining money needed

for construction.

But New Mexico has since taken on a \$450 million deficit. The ambitious project was budgeted at about \$209 million, but a second runway could be needed to expand commercial operations. Ms. Martinez has made it clear she wants any additional financing for the Spaceport to come from private industry.

“That’s going to be our big push right now,” she said.

Supporters of the project say the Spaceport could create hundreds of jobs and draw wealthy tourists. But some here question the new governor’s commitment to see it through.

“Let’s face it — privatizing the Spaceport means selling it off and trying to remove any risk to the state,” said Rick Homans, who was appointed by Mr. Richardson as the facility’s executive director until Ms. Martinez asked him to step down. “The message would be that the state is not committed long term, and the new industry will look at other states where they can find a fully engaged partner.”

New Mexico is not the only entity heavily invested. Sir [Richard Branson’s Virgin Galactic](#) has signed on to be the facility’s anchor tenant for 20 years and has dedicated hundreds of millions of dollars toward developing the technology.

In 2005, amid considerable fanfare, Virgin began taking reservations for spaceflights — a ticket costs \$200,000. Construction of the 110,000-square-foot hangar and terminal is nearing completion. Virgin Galactic’s chief executive and president, George Whitesides, said in a recent interview that the company expected to launch commercial flights within two years.

Its engineers are working to finish the rocket engine that will power the small spaceship, Mr. Whitesides said.

Virgin estimates each flight will take roughly two and a half hours — including four minutes in actual space and the iconic view of Earth from outside its atmosphere.

Mr. Whitesides predicted that the spectacle of the rich and famous being rocketed into space will lure much needed work here, and Virgin is looking at building a luxury hotel nearby.

“Clearly, the state’s economy has changed. That said, most of the money has either already been allocated or spent on the project,” said Mr. Whitesides, a former chief of staff for the [National Aeronautics and Space Administration](#). “I really do think this is a case where the investment has been made, and a relatively small expenditure will open the possibility for tremendous growth in New Mexico.”



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In nearby Truth or Consequences, a quirky art town named for the long-running game show, residents have mixed, though curious, thoughts about space travel in their backyard.

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"I'm for the Spaceport," said Cherrill Sullivan, who owns a western clothing shop here. "We need jobs bad."

A local hair stylist, Susan Kopet, shook her head at the notion of the Spaceport's providing an economic boon for the area.

"I pay taxes on it, but I don't have the money to go up in space," Ms. Kopet said. "I can think of a lot better ways to spend millions of dollars."

A former Spaceport board member, D. Kent Evans, a supporter of Ms. Martinez, finds himself reassuring locals about the project.

"I just want it to be successful," Mr. Evans said. "I tell people this is going to be one of the best decisions they ever made."

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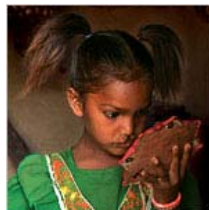
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