

NASA's 7 new space pioneers are companies

February 2 2010, By SETH BORENSTEIN , AP Science Writer

(AP) -- A half century ago the Mercury Seven embodied America's space future. Now it's the merchant seven - space companies for hire.

Mimicking a scene 51 years ago when the Mercury astronauts were revealed, NASA's boss beamed Tuesday as he introduced the "faces of a new frontier:" representatives of the seven companies that NASA is funding to develop future private spacecraft.

And more money is coming. In President Barack Obama's proposed budget, he not only killed his predecessor's \$100 billion [moon program](#), he proposed spending \$6 billion over five years to develop private [space taxis](#). NASA would then pay them to carry astronauts to the [International Space Station](#).

Some of the players include companies run by Internet pioneers Jeff Bezos of Amazon and Elon Musk of PayPal. Bezos runs Blue Origin, a Kent, Wash., company that until Tuesday had only talked about going into suborbital space; now it will compete to go into orbit as a space taxi. Musk runs SpaceX of Hawthorne, Calif. and already has built a rocket called Falcon and a capsule called Dragon.

Others include Boeing Co. of Houston; Paragon Space Development Co. of Tucson, Ariz.; Sierra Nevada Corp. of Sparks, Nev.; United Launch Alliance of Denver, and Orbital Science Corp. of Dulles, Va.

NASA on Tuesday detailed \$50 million worth of seed grants for development of a space taxi to Boeing, Sierra Nevada, Paragon, United

Launch and Blue Origin.

A year ago, the space agency gave \$3.5 billion in contracts to Orbital Science and SpaceX for 20 commercial cargo resupply flights to the space station. Both are likely to develop crew taxis too, with Musk of SpaceX saying he could fly astronauts within three years of a final contract. And he said he could do it for \$20 million a head, less than half the price NASA pays Russia for astronauts flying on that country's Soyuz capsule.

NASA administrator Charles Bolden and officials from the companies said just because space will become for-profit, safety will not be forgotten, as some congressional critics worry.

"It's all about crew safety," United Launch Alliance President Mike Gass said. Gass's company got a \$6.7 million NASA grant so the firm's Atlas and Delta rockets could be better monitored to provide safety for any astronauts sitting on capsules on top of them. Bezos' Blue Origin received \$3.7 million from NASA to work on a new type of launch escape system for a crew on top of a rocket.

"I know personally the great challenges involved in sending humans into orbit and have lost friends in trying to do so," said Bolden, a former shuttle commander. "I pledge to you that I will make it my job everyday to ensure that everything is done efficiently and safely."

There won't be just one winner, officials said. NASA hopes there will be multiple spaceships carrying crews, pushing costs down and safety up. There may be even more than just these seven, Bolden said.

With the dramatic changes ordered by the Obama administration, NASA is going back to its pre-Apollo 1959-60 roots, when it was a research-and-development powerhouse more than an engineering factory, said Harry

Lambright, a professor of public policy at Syracuse University.

"It turns NASA inside out; it takes it back to the old days, pre-Apollo days," Lambright said. He called it a gamble that might not work.

What's happening is part spin, part needed reinvention, said American University space policy and historian Howard McCurdy.

"Clearly what they're trying to do is it make it look positive. Instead of making it a story of cancellations, it's a story of new beginnings," McCurdy said. "It probably is in some ways as dramatic as the appointment of the first new astronauts."

Ken Bowersox, a former astronaut and now a SpaceX vice president, was one of those introduced and said he couldn't help but notice the parallel to the Mercury astronauts - right down to the number seven.

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