

NM spaceport sets stage for commercial space race

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Sir Richard Branson, founder of Virgin Galactic, left, and Gov. Bill Richardson, give their stamp of approval during a dedication ceremony for the runway at Spaceport America in Upham, N.M., on Friday, Oct. 22, 2010. Branson says he expects Virgin Galactic to begin offering suborbital flights within nine to 18 months.(AP Photo/Las Cruces Sun-News, Norm Dettlaff)

(AP) -- British tycoon Richard Branson has dreamed of going to space since he was a teenager. He'll get his wish when Virgin Galactic begins taking tourists into suborbital space from a specially designed spaceport in the New Mexico desert.

Gov. Bill Richardson, a longtime space buff, remembers when astronaut Alan Shepard first reached space and man first walked on the moon. He wants to see space too, but he's not willing to be among the first passengers on Branson's out-of-this-world venture.

Branson and Richardson shook hands five years ago to build the world's first dedicated spaceport. With the runway 45 miles north of Las Cruces complete, and the terminal and hangar facility nearly done, they see their partnership as a major milestone for the world's burgeoning commercial space tourism industry.

It's only a matter of time now - and not much time - before the industry starts to take off, experts say.

"It's a dream come true. It's happened. New Mexico is going to be a leader in space tourism," Richardson proclaimed last week, standing on the nearly two-mile-long concrete runway at Spaceport America.

Others who were present included 130 journalists from around the world, a group of British school children, a few dozen people who have already paid hefty deposits to be among Virgin Galactic's first customers, and former NASA astronaut Buzz Aldrin, who walked on the moon in 1969.

Branson and Richardson predict this place in southern New Mexico will be a hot spot in the next nine to 18 months. But it won't be the only one.

The commercial space industry is rapidly developing with companies like SpaceX of Hawthorne, Calif., seeking to supply the International Space Station for NASA. [SpaceX](#), run by PayPal founder Elon Musk, has successfully placed a dummy payload into orbit and has contracts to lift satellites next.

Other firms, including Masten Space Systems of Mojave, Calif., and Armadillo Aerospace of Rockwall, Texas, are testing systems that would carry unmanned payloads to space.

Amazon.com Inc. CEO Jeff Bezos is also in the race with Blue Origin, a

Washington state company that plans to compete as a space taxi.

Boeing Co. has lined up Virginia-based Space Adventures to sell seats on the seven-person spaceship it wants to build to fly to the [International Space Station](#) starting in 2015. Space Adventures currently sells seats on trips to the space station aboard the Russian-built Soyuz spaceship.

NASA Deputy Administrator Lori Garver said the recent flurry of development in the commercial space industry dovetails perfectly with the agency's intention of working more closely with the private sector. Just last month, Congress approved legislation affirming President Barack Obama's intent to use commercial carriers to lift humans into near-Earth space.

After 50 years of NASA space exploration, Garver said, "we need to be confident that credible, innovative, enterprising and bold individuals and entities are ready, willing and able to receive the torch."

The spaceport, she said, will provide a jump start for the commercial space industry by providing a place to launch and land, and by piquing more private interest and competition in space travel.

"No question that over the next five to 10 years there will be more people going to space, whether it's from here in New Mexico with Virgin Galactic, with other entities or from other parts of the country," Garver said.

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