

Shuttle's end hits Houston in ego more than wallet

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In this June 30, 2011 photo, the crew of STS-135, from left, pilot Doug Hurley, commander Chris Ferguson, mission specialist Sandy Magnus and mission specialist Rex Walheim pose for a group photo following the crew media briefing at the Johnson Space Center, in Houston. The news briefing provided the last scheduled opportunity for a large group of media to speak with the space shuttle Atlantis crew before the final launch on July 8. (AP Photo/Houston Chronicle, Smiley N. Pool) MANDATORY CREDIT

(AP) -- The end of the space shuttle program is hitting its Florida launch home in the pocketbook with some areas practically becoming economic ghost towns. But Houston, home of Mission Control, is getting hit somewhere else: in the ego.

Aerospace ranks only fourth among booming industries, far, far behind king oil, Mayor Annise Parker said. It's a pride thing for a city whose

baseball team is the Astros and whose basketball team is the Rockets.

Space is "part of our psyche here," Parker said. "It's how we view ourselves as a city."

This is a metropolis of 4 million people that has tied its identity to space and to the shuttle specifically. But that identity has taken three hard hits and the loss of thousands of jobs is just one of them.

The first blow came in 2004, when then-President George W. Bush announced the end of the [space shuttle](#) program. His plan was to replace it with a return-to-the-moon program run out of Houston.

Then in 2010, President [Barack Obama](#) canceled that over-budget Houston-centric shuttle replacement program. He proposed going to an asteroid in a plan that at the moment is less detailed, especially when it comes to Houston's role. The concept relies on [private companies](#) to take NASA's place when it comes to shuttling people to Earth's orbit and the [International Space Station](#), with NASA buying rides on these private ships. Many of those private companies - including the acknowledged leader, SpaceX, have little connection to Houston.

Then in April came what some in this city consider the cruelest blow: Houston would not be getting one of the retired shuttle's to display.

Many locals, from hotel housekeepers to the mayor, are angry.

"We need space because space was the heart and soul of Houston," says Bob Mitchell, president of the Bay Area Houston Economic Partnership. "We've got the knowledge and skilled people to move forward."

Last year, 16,613 people in Houston had jobs because of the Johnson [Space Center](#) in Houston. NASA's economic impact in Texas was \$6.5

billion last year with \$2 billion of that because of the space shuttle, the space agency calculated in a recent report. Most of that is in the area around Clear Lake, south of downtown. But Harris County, which includes Houston, has more than 2 million people employed.

And while NASA means a lot of money, it represents just a fraction of 1 percent of the state's gross domestic product.

The Houston area has already lost about 2,000 space shuttle jobs - government and private contractors - in the past several months, Mitchell said. Another 1,800 or so layoffs will come after space shuttle Atlantis lands in July, ending the 30-year program.

Harris County's May unemployment rate of 8.2 percent is almost a full percentage point below the national average and looks robust compared to the 10.8 percent jobless rate on the Florida Space Coast.

The space shuttle's work force nationwide peaked in 1991 at 32,000 government and private contract workers. In 2006, that number was about half that, and now is about 6,300 and shrinking, according to NASA.

Houston has always been the brains of the [space shuttle program](#) - the engineers, the managers, and of course astronauts - while Florida has been the muscle, the technicians who refurbish, prepare and launch the spacecraft.

Technicians in Florida who specialize in space shuttles are finding it tougher to get other jobs than engineers, managers and computer geeks in a city like Houston with thriving energy and health care industries.

At a June job fair in Houston for laid off aerospace workers, 68 companies came looking for as many as 4,000 new employees, Mitchell

said.

"Companies are dying for these employees," Mitchell said.

The heart of Johnson Space Center is Mission Control, whose identity is melded with Houston's. When astronauts radio from space they call "Houston" not Mission Control.

And things are bleak these days at Mission Control. Already there are way too many empty desks in the offices where flight controllers work. Former Johnson Space Center director George Abbey said it is like a library, it's so quiet.

And it will get quieter as the people who work the last mission also get laid off, said mission operations director Paul Hill, who estimates he will have to give notice to about 900 people.

"When I see a fantastic ascent and entry flight controller who is the best in the business and will be out of work, I can't even tell him what all that's going to lead to," Hill said. "What are we transitioning to? The havoc we're wreaking, the decimation on a national asset is very real."

When NASA decided to give those retired shuttles to Kennedy Space Center, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., Houston howled. Mayor Parker, although a Democrat like the president, called the decision a political one.

Even so, she said, "It's not a piece of machinery that defines the space program. It's the men and women who create that machine. And that is Houston."

One place that for more than a decade defined the [shuttle program](#) is now an empty lot with scattered discarded paper, broken wood and lots

of weeds.

When America's space shuttle fleet was soaring in its prime, this spot was flying with activity, history and most of all astronauts. The empty lot used to be home to a bar called The Outpost. It wasn't just any tavern, but a beery "Right Stuff" type of astronaut hangout crammed with space memorabilia and brimming with space talk.

Last October, the recently closed tavern burned down.

This lot is too valuable to remain empty for long. Something that will generate even more money will likely be built because Houston's economy is starting to fly again, Mitchell said. The loss of The Outpost is a good symbol for what's happening with the space program and Houston. It's not over, but the change strikes an emotional chord in a place that can't see America thriving in space without Houston running it all.

"We're not a gloom and doom type of city," Mitchell said. "This community will survive. The concern this community has is will America survive as the leader in human [space](#) exploration?"

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