

Race is on to lure new SpaceX launchpad

June 21 2012, By Mark K. Matthews

A record-breaking mission to the International Space Station has triggered another space race back on Earth, with Florida competing against Texas and Puerto Rico for the chance to land a new launchpad for Space Exploration Technologies Corp., or SpaceX, and its ambitious line of Falcon rockets.

The rivalry - already ongoing - only has intensified in the weeks since SpaceX became the first commercial company to blast a spacecraft to the station and return it safely to Earth. And though none of the rivals has made public the incentives each is offering, the numbers are certain to be in the millions of dollars.

The stakes are high: hundreds of good-paying jobs at SpaceX and supporting companies that would pop up around its operation, as well as the prestige - at a time when NASA is no longer flying its own rockets - of serving as home to the commercial [space](#) industry's most successful startup.

SpaceX founder Elon Musk, the Internet billionaire who founded his company a decade ago in California, is expected to take full advantage of the competition.

As part of his victory lap following the successful return of his Dragon capsule from the space station, Musk met last week with Texas Gov. Rick Perry to discuss locating a launchpad at the southernmost tip of the Lone Star State.

Texas officials and economic leaders have acknowledged working on an incentive package, estimated in the millions of dollars, to lure SpaceX to the city of Brownsville. And the [Federal Aviation Administration](#), which must sign off on new launch sites, already has held a public hearing on that possibility.

"Please be assured that as you seek to expand the capabilities of SpaceX to launch spacecraft, whether unmanned or manned, the State of Texas stands ready to support you and the work of your talented employees who are blazing a new trail into space," Perry wrote to Musk earlier this month.

So far, SpaceX has not disclosed what incentives it has been offered or the timing of its decision, though Musk recently indicated that Texas might have the inside track, calling it the "lead candidate" before meeting with Perry.

Florida officials acknowledge the competition is keen. They're hoping to leverage the fact that SpaceX already has one launchpad at Cape Canaveral, which the company will use to launch all its NASA flights, including the dozen space-station resupply missions in its \$1.6 billion contract with the agency. Any future crew flights would also be launched from there.

But SpaceX officials said the one Florida pad isn't enough to handle both its government work and flights for commercial customers.

"Our manifest is growing quickly, and we will need an additional launch site," said Kirstin Brost Grantham, the company's spokeswoman.

SpaceX recently inked a deal with Intelsat, a major satellite operator, for a future launch aboard a massive new rocket that is still under development. And its manifest already shows more than a half-dozen

commercial flights through 2014 in which SpaceX will carry satellites to orbit.

Florida officials also note they have a track record of helping the company. Space Florida, the state's aerospace booster, has invested more than \$8.5 million so far to help establish the company at Cape Canaveral.

Frank DiBello, head of Space Florida, said the state intends to be "aggressively competitive" in landing the new launchpad - by offering financial incentives; one offer under consideration is converting a pad formerly used by the space shuttle at Kennedy Space Center into a facility for SpaceX.

DiBello said he's also making the broader argument that keeping its operations in one place would enable SpaceX to simplify its supply chain and lower its costs.

"We are going to try and make the case with those things that directly impact his business model and ease of operations," he said.

DiBello said he's also trying to convince Musk to build a facility in Florida to reprocess the engines of his Falcon rockets. SpaceX hopes to eventually develop technology that would allow its rocket stages to steer themselves back to Earth to be used again, which can drive down costs.

Still, DiBello admitted that Florida faces one obstacle that has no immediate solution. The Air Force and NASA already use Cape Canaveral for launches - of government satellites and space probes - and SpaceX at times could be forced to wait its turn until the range is clear.

"There is only so much flexibility they can have with others on the range," DiBello said.

Considering that Musk has designed his company to be as autonomous as possible, having to wait for a launch window might be a deal-breaker when compared to remote locations in Texas and Puerto Rico.

Indeed, Puerto Rican officials are making geography a core argument in their pitch.

Jose Perez-Riera, the island's secretary for economic development and commerce, said Puerto Rico has been talking with SpaceX for more than a year about potential sites on the east coast.

Perez-Riera said Puerto Rico is closer to the equator than Cape Canaveral or Brownsville, which means SpaceX rockets would use less fuel (and thus cost less to launch to orbit) because rockets get more of a "boost" from Earth's rotation near the equator.

He said Puerto Rico could provide significant tax breaks and other incentives for [SpaceX](#) - for the same reason that Texas and Florida are crafting offers.

"It would put Puerto Rico on the map for this budding industry," he said.

(c)2012 The Orlando Sentinel (Orlando, Fla.)
Distributed by MCT Information Services

Citation: Race is on to lure new SpaceX launchpad (2012, June 21) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-06-lure-spacex-launchpad.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--