

Fla. scrambles to get NASA's OK for land to build launch pad

January 31 2013, by Mark K. Matthews

NASA is balking at plans by Space Florida to build a new commercial launch pad near Kennedy Space Center, and now state officials - in both Tallahassee and Washington, D.C. - are racing to persuade the space agency to change its mind.

Why the hurry?

[SpaceX](#) of California is expected - possibly this year - to choose where it wants to locate its next [launch pad](#) - a potential cash cow for whatever state lands the facility.

Texas already has an early edge, and if Florida doesn't show progress soon in securing the necessary land, then the state could lose out.

"The future of space in Florida will be decided in the next few months," said Dale Ketcham, director of the University of Central Florida's [Spaceport](#) Research and Technology Institute.

Lt. Gov. Jennifer Carroll and members of Space Florida, the state's aerospace-booster group, are scheduled to meet Wednesday in Tallahassee to plan their next step, and those close to the group said Space Florida has only about four months to make a breakthrough.

The proposed Florida site is the abandoned citrus town of Shiloh, which straddles the county border of Volusia and Brevard and sits at the northern boundary of [Kennedy Space Center](#).

[State officials](#) want to convert 150 acres of that property into a spaceport with two launch pads far enough from KSC and [Cape Canaveral](#) that a company such as SpaceX could launch its rockets without having to schedule missions between ones flown by NASA and the Air Force.

But before Space Florida can do anything, it first must get the land from NASA.

Last year, Carroll sent NASA a note asking as much.

"Florida believes that the properties identified in this request are excess to the needs of the U.S. Government and such properties are not otherwise needed for public use," she wrote.

NASA, however, saw it differently.

"The property identified in your request has not been reported as excess. Furthermore, this property continues to serve NASA long-term mission requirements, as a buffer zone between NASA mission and local communities and as a potential site for future mission requirements," responded agency officials.

Since then, both NASA and Space Florida officials said that they are working on some sort of compromise, possibly even leasing the land.

Indeed, NASA recently released a statement that noted it has not "rejected" the state's proposal and was looking to find another path.

The situation has attracted enough notice that a spokesman for U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson said the Florida Democrat, a one-time [space](#)-shuttle flier, has asked for a briefing on the topic - a bit of subtle pressure that could nudge the process along.

Looming over these negotiations, however, are long-standing concerns from environmentalists who fear another spaceport could harm the 15 or more threatened or endangered species in the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, a 140,000-acre sanctuary that overlays KSC.

Their opposition in 2008 helped stop a similar proposal, and mitigating environmental impact could be critical in ensuring the project moves forward.

Meanwhile, other states such as Texas continue to court SpaceX, which made history last year by becoming the first commercial company to blast an unmanned spacecraft to the station and return it safely.

Though the company already has a pad at Cape Canaveral for NASA flights, it wants another for commercial customers.

SpaceX officials were coy, however, on how soon it would make a decision.

"We are considering multiple areas, including Florida, Texas, Georgia and Puerto Rico, for a future private launch facility, but we are in the early stages of that process," spokeswoman Emily Shanklin said.

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