

New Mexico Senate panel passes on spaceport sale bill

February 19 2015, by Susan Montoya Bryan



Sen. Clemente Sanchez, D-Grants, right, suggested the quarter-billion-dollar Spaceport America is failing due to a lack of revenue during a committee meeting in Santa Fe, N.M., on Thursday, Feb. 19, 2015. The Senate Corporations and Transportation Committee on Thursday advanced without recommendation a bill that calls for selling the spaceport. (AP Photo/Susan Montoya Bryan)

New Mexico lawmakers on Thursday debated the merits of Spaceport America and whether its futuristic hangar, its nearly 2-mile-long runway and the 18,000 acres that surround it will offer a return on taxpayers'

nearly quarter-billion-dollar investment.

Sen. George Munoz, D-Gallup, said lawmakers have a responsibility to ask the question, and that's why he introduced a measure that calls for selling the spaceport.

"As a senator, we represent the entire state, and we don't want to hurt one portion or another, but we have to watch our tax dollars," he told members of the Senate Corporations and Transportation Committee.

The committee voted Thursday to advance Munoz's bill without a recommendation. Some lawmakers said they want the discussion to continue because they still have questions about the \$220 million endeavor.

The bill adds fuel to criticisms that Spaceport America—first initiated by former Gov. Bill Richardson, a Democrat, and British billionaire Richard Branson—is a boondoggle.

Promises of commercial flights launching from the spaceport have been pushed back year after year. It happened again in 2014, when anchor tenant Virgin Galactic had its spaceship break up over the California desert during a test flight. One pilot was killed, another was seriously injured and the program was set back at least another year.



Sen. George Munoz, D-Gallup, tells a panel of fellow lawmakers there are outstanding questions about the quarter-billion-dollar Spaceport America during a committee meeting in Santa Fe, N.M., on Thursday, Feb. 19, 2015. The Senate Corporations and Transportation Committee advanced Munoz's bill to sell the spaceport without offering a recommendation. (AP Photo/Susan Montoya Bryan)

"I'm beginning to fear that the spaceport is a white elephant that was given to us by a former governor and an international billionaire and if we're not careful, all our hay is going to be eaten," said Sen. Mark Moores, R-Albuquerque.

Supporters, including business owners in the aerospace and tourism industries, argued that developing a spaceport from scratch doesn't happen overnight and that New Mexico has a chance to be on the front end of the burgeoning commercial space industry.

Sen. Michael Padilla, D-Albuquerque, said he worried about pulling the plug now and the effect that would have on efforts to boost New Mexico's struggling economy.

"When Microsoft was trying to get off the ground, we practically laughed them out of this state and all of those 50,000 or 100,000 jobs went right along with them," he said. "We didn't take them seriously, and we didn't make the thing happen and we ended up not having that type of an investment here in New Mexico."

New Mexico Spaceport Authority executive director Christine Anderson was disappointed the legislation made it out of the committee, saying it suggests to prospective tenants in the U.S. and abroad that the state doesn't support the world's first purpose-built spaceport.

"The longer they carry this on, the more harmful this is going to be," she told The Associated Press.

Spaceport America, she said, is the only one of the nation's nine licensed facilities that has access to such a large swath of restricted airspace, something that allows tenants such Virgin Galactic to have dependable schedules for launching paying customers into space.

Testing for a reusable rocket being developed by Elon Musk's SpaceX is expected to begin at the spaceport this spring.

Anderson argued that the spaceport has created about 1,400 jobs and half of its 35 full-time employees are now funded by revenues from lease and user fees. She said that shows it's on the right track.

Anderson said another concern is that selling Spaceport America could result in costly litigation with tenants.

The legislation would have to clear at least two additional Senate committees before reaching the floor for a vote.

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