

Georgia spaceport land deal is off, site owner says

July 22 2022, by RUSS BYNUM



This artist's sketch provided by Spaceport Camden shows the launch pad complex of the proposed Spaceport Camden in Camden County, Ga. The owner of a large industrial site on the Georgia coast said Thursday, July 21, 2022, it has ended a longstanding agreement to sell the property to a county government that has worked for years toward using the land to build a launch pad for commercial rockets. Credit: Spaceport Camden via AP, File

The owner of a large industrial site on the Georgia coast said Thursday

that it has ended a longstanding agreement to sell the property to a county government whose officials worked for years on a plan to build a launch pad for commercial rockets there.

Opponents who fear the proposed Spaceport Camden would pose serious safety and [environmental risks](#) hailed the development as a potential deal breaker for the project, which Camden County officials have spent a decade and more than \$10 million pursuing.

County officials, meanwhile, insisted they still have a binding contract to purchase the site.

Union Carbide Corporation owns 4,000 acres (1,600 hectares) in the county where commissioners have pursued the spaceport for launching satellites into orbit. The county government in 2015 entered into an option agreement with the company to buy the land once the county obtained a spaceport operator license from the Federal Aviation Administration.

The FAA awarded the license in December. But before county commissioners could close on the land, opponents forced a referendum on the project by gathering more than 3,500 petition signatures. The project was put to a vote in March, and 72% cast ballots to block the deal.

In a statement Thursday, Union Carbide noted that Camden County voters had "repudiated" the land purchase.

"As a result, there is no longer an Option Agreement in existence between the County and UCC, and UCC does not intend to convey the property to the County pursuant to the prior Option Agreement," said the statement, emailed to The Associated Press by Union Carbide spokesman Tom Sprick.

Steve Howard, Camden County's government administrator, provided a statement from the county's lawyers insisting the deal isn't over.

"Union Carbide most certainly has a contract with Camden," the statement said. "The County has indicated that it is ready, willing and able to close. We expect Union Carbide to honor its contractual commitments."

Howard has led the spaceport project, saying it would bring [economic growth](#) not just from rocket launches, but also by attracting related industries and tourists to the community of 55,000 people on the Georgia-Florida line.

Opponents say building the spaceport on an industrial plot formerly used to manufacture pesticides and munitions would pose potential hazards that outweigh any economic benefits.

Critics, including the National Park Service, have said rockets exploding soon after launch could rain fiery debris onto Little Cumberland Island, which has about 40 private homes, and neighboring Cumberland Island, a federally protected wilderness visited by about 60,000 tourists each year.

Megan Desrosiers, president of the coastal Georgia conservation group One Hundred Miles, called the end of the land purchase agreement "a huge deal."

"If Union Carbide doesn't sell the property to Camden County, then there's no site for a spaceport," said Desrosiers, whose group helped organize the petition drive that forced the referendum.

The big loss at the polls in March didn't stop county officials from pursuing the project. Commissioners in April voted unanimously to

notify Union Carbide that they planned to move forward with the land purchase. The company said at the time it was evaluating the agreement.

Meanwhile, county officials are trying to have the referendum declared invalid by the Georgia Supreme Court. Their legal appeal argues that Georgia's constitution doesn't allow voters to veto government projects such as the [spaceport](#). The court is scheduled to hear the case Aug. 23.

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Citation: Georgia spaceport land deal is off, site owner says (2022, July 22) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-07-georgia-spaceport-site-owner.html>

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