

SpaceX Plans Reusable Seven Person Capsule

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SpaceX said it plans to develop a reusable capsule that could carry a crew of up to seven into low Earth orbit, making it a competitor to assume some of the tasks of NASA's space shuttle fleet after it is retired.

The capsule, called Dragon, would launch via the company's Falcon 9 rocket. It "can be described as a mix between Apollo and Soyuz, but with the goal of reusability," Elon Musk, the company's founder and chief executive officer, told SpaceDaily.com in an e-mail.

Last week, SpaceX submitted its Dragon proposal to NASA for its Commercial Orbital Transportation Systems program. More than two dozen companies may be vying for the \$500 million NASA has set aside to help the development of private orbital systems.

The company said the capsule could meet all four COTS requirements: the ability to transport both pressurized and unpressurized cargo, and the ability to fulfill both fully crewed and partly automated missions. COTS funding could accelerate Dragon's development, but SpaceX said the capsule's "realization is not contingent on the procurement."

The project has been quietly underway for nearly two years, funded at an undisclosed amount by Musk. Estimated development costs for the Falcon 1 and Falcon 9 rockets are about \$100 million.

SpaceX has created a prototype of the capsule that includes "a thoroughly tested 30-man-day-life-support system." All design,

manufacturing, testing and transport activities for the prototype have taken place at the company's El Segundo headquarters.

"I feel confident about being able to offer NASA an ISS servicing capability and am prepared to back that up with my own funding," Musk said. "It took SpaceX just over three years to build both a company and a rocket from the ground up, including engines, structure, avionics, two launch sites, regulatory approvals, etc."

He also said if the company had not been required to move its launch site to Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands, instead of Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, "we would very likely have launched by now. As it is, total time from zero to launch will be just over three and a half years."

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