

Space companies eye HI as potential new frontier

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This conceptual artist rendering provided by Rocketplane Global Inc. on Friday July 10, 2009, shows the Rocketplane XP spacecraft. Hawaii could become the eighth state granted a spaceport license. Several space tourism companies, including Rocketplane, have shown interest in coming to Hawaii, said John Strom, vice president of business development for Enterprise Honolulu, the Oahu economic development board. (AP Photo/Rocketplane Global Inc.)

(AP) -- Tourists coming to Hawaii for high-end getaways could someday be launched from the sand to the stars, taking island-hopping to new heights. Hawaii could even be the first state where space travelers use rocket planes to get from one place to another. Rather than launching and landing in the same spot, planners envision the planes taking off in one place, traveling through space, then coming down in another, going from the Big Island to Oahu. Within a decade, space travelers could island hop from Hawaii to Japan in 45 minutes.

And promoters promise a unique perspective during the Hawaii flight.

"Flying down the Hawaii island chain, it's a completely different view of the planet than you'll see when you launch from landlocked states," said Chuck Lauer, vice president of business development for Oklahoma City-based Rocketplane Global. "It's the blue planet view of the world."

Hawaii's tourism leaders recognize the potential for attracting visitors with the promise of space travel, but it's unclear whether Gov. Linda Lingle will release the licensing money at a time when the state is facing big budget problems and possible government employee layoffs. A new law authorizes the state to spend \$500,000 to apply for a spaceport license from the federal government, which is the first step toward allowing commercial space travel from the islands.

Lingle has indicated she will either sign the legislation this month or let it become law without her signature. But she has the authority to withhold the money even after the bill becomes law.

If the plan goes forward, tourists would pay \$200,000 for a weeklong package including spaceflight training, resort accommodations and short test flights to simulate weightlessness.

At the vacation's finale, five voyagers would embark on a horizontal takeoff aboard a special rocket plane, climb to 40,000 feet before rockets fire, accelerate to 3,500 mph, coast for a few minutes of weightlessness 62 miles above the Earth, flip over and then return to ground.

Jim Crisafulli, the state's director of aerospace development, is confident many people would come to Hawaii to fly to space. "They wouldn't bat an eye at spending that amount of money to fly to space," he said. "It's going to be a soul-energizing experience."

Hawaii could become the eighth state granted a spaceport license. The process will take about

three years, meaning space flights wouldn't start before 2012.

Eventually, [space travel](#) companies would like to see the flights used for transportation, not just as a tourist attraction.

Hawaii would use existing runways on Oahu and the Big Island for its space program, which would use a rocket plane that looks like a midsize business jet. The plane is still in the design phase, with actual construction expected to begin in a year and a half in Burns Flat, Okla.

The spaceport licensing process will involve studying the rocket plane's potential effects on the environment, said state Tourism Liaison Marsha Wienert.

"I'm trying to stay as neutral and calm as possible on this," she said. "As we plan for the future, I agree that we should consider all opportunities, and hopefully the environmental impact statement will show that it is an opportunity."

Lauer said the space planes wouldn't harm the environment because they'll be powered by liquid oxygen and synthetic jet fuel.

Several space tourism companies, including Rocketplane, have shown interest in coming to Hawaii if they could, said John Strom, vice president of business development for Enterprise Honolulu, the Oahu economic development board. Those businesses' studies show they can turn a tidy profit if the Hawaii market opens.

[Space](#) tourists will come away with a different understanding of how fragile the Earth is, said Strom, a private pilot.

"The higher you go, the smaller it gets," he said. "You definitely get a sense of the uniqueness of this fragile blue marble that we live on."

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