

Google plans aerospace, robotics projects for Hangar One

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If you were Google Inc., what would you do with a 350,000-square-foot hangar that was originally built to house helium airships for the U.S. Navy?

How about using its cavernous interior for building and testing new robots, planetary rovers and other space or aviation technology?

A NASA spokeswoman confirmed Tuesday that those plans are part of the proposal submitted by a subsidiary of the giant Internet company, along with restoring the outside of the landmark structure known as Hangar One at Moffett Federal Airfield in California. Based on that proposal, U.S. officials said this week they will negotiate a long-term lease with Google for a significant portion of the former naval base, including three historic hangars, two runways and some adjacent land and buildings.

While the company is best known for its Internet search engine, software and other online services, Google's founders and several top executives also have a well-documented interest in robots, high-altitude balloons, aviation and space exploration.

In recent months, Google has confirmed buying eight small robotics companies for a mysterious new division headed by its former Android software

chief, Andy Rubin. Google co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin already own a fleet of jets now parked at Moffett Field. And Page, the company's CEO, has reportedly invested in a separate company that hopes to mine asteroids for precious metals.

While a Google spokeswoman didn't respond to requests for more details about the company's plans, it's clear the massive Hangar One would provide plenty of room for tinkering with exotic hardware. The Depression-era structure is 200 feet tall and covers 8 acres. All told, the proposed lease would provide more than 1 million square feet of space in Hangar One and its two neighbors, known as Two and Three.

That's probably enough for projects such as Google's plans to develop new robot technology for manufacturing and retail shopping. Rubin is reportedly working in a Palo Alto, Calif., office now, but the effort appears to be expanding. The Wall Street Journal reported Tuesday that Rubin has discussed a robotics partnership with the Taiwanese manufacturing giant Foxconn.

It's unclear if Google plans to sublet any of the Moffett space to other commercial tenants, although local real estate experts say it would be an attractive property. Neighboring residents said they might be concerned if Google brings more air traffic or daytime workers into the area. Mountain View City Manager Dan Rich, however, said in a statement that he's pleased the landmark hangar will be restored.

Officials at NASA and the U.S. General Services Administration, which helps administer federal property, said only that the proposal from Google subsidiary Planetary Ventures described using all three historic hangars for "research, testing, assembly and development" of new technology related to space, aviation and "rover/robotics."

The proposal also calls for building a new 90,000-square-foot structure on the property that Planetary Ventures would make available "at no cost" for a "public benefit educational/museum/incubator," said GSA spokeswoman Jackeline Stewart.

Federal officials rejected competing proposals from two other groups, including a coalition of scientists and entrepreneurs that wanted to make the airfield a center for new aerospace companies. One rival was disqualified because it didn't follow procedures, officials said, while another fell short on several criteria.

As part of its proposal, which NASA official Richard Keegan rated "exceptional," Google promised to upgrade a golf course on the property and provide a net increase in revenue for the federal government, while operating the two runways on a "low-use" basis for a mix of private and government flights. Officials said specific financial terms haven't been negotiated.

Since it was decommissioned as a Navy air base in 1994, the sprawling, 2,000-acre Moffett property has been home to a mix of private tenants and government agencies, including NASA's Ames Research Center and a wing of the California Air National Guard. NASA currently occupies about 500 acres, but the government has negotiated long-term leases for other portions over the years.

Google has a separate long-term lease to build a planned office campus on 42 acres of the site, which are not physically connected to the airfield portion. A coalition of local colleges has a lease for 77 acres, where it hopes to build classrooms, labs and possibly housing.

Several aerospace contractors also use the site. Former NASA scientist Sean Casey, who led one of the rival bidding groups, said he hopes Google will keep the airfield open to aerospace startups.

"Moffett Field is a great place for new space companies to connect with the investment community and with NASA Ames," he said.

In a statement Monday, Google said simply: "We

are delighted to move ahead in the selection process and we are looking forward to working with both GSA and NASA to preserve the heritage of Moffett Federal Airfield."

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