

Spaceport America: Building a Better Future for Our Children

Jobs and education are two of Doña Ana County's most pressing issues. While we may focus on one or the other, everyone knows they are interconnected. Nowhere is this truer than the opportunity represented by Spaceport America.

In 2007, Doña Ana County voters agreed to support the spaceport with a tax increase that generates more than \$8 million annually. Seventy-five percent goes toward construction bonds. By state law, the remainder is for "space-related projects." In 2008, our County Commission decided to use the 25% for educational purposes.

The spaceport tax cannot be eliminated until the bonds are paid off in 2029. Funds provided by the bonds have been used to build a \$220 million space launch facility in southern New Mexico. The anchor tenant plans to begin flights within the year and contracts with other companies are being actively pursued.

Residents of Doña Ana County are the largest investor group in Spaceport America and deserve to benefit from its success. From a business perspective, we are stockholders in a high-risk, long-term enterprise that could generate significant returns for the millions we invest every year.

For the most part, we have been silent partners in this venture. Although a few groups are working on space-related projects, their efforts are not coordinated or well publicized. Comments from residents typically focus on limited use of local companies, discontent with missed deadlines, and skepticism about space tourism.

While understandable, this approach does not change the situation or improve our return on investment. More important, the status quo gives up on the promise of "Building a better economic future for our children." That commitment was at the heart of the spaceport vote. It was a pledge by the State of New Mexico and our community to expand job opportunities and to prepare our kids for those jobs.

Any good financial manager will periodically assess a portfolio based on relevant goals, conditions, and trends. That is why I am asking other local officials, business leaders, and our academic institutions to rethink what we are doing with the spaceport tax and Spaceport America. Adjustments are urgently needed on four fronts: business development, branding, spaceport access, and education. Let me explain.

To be effective, local efforts to capitalize on the spaceport must be guided by a business plan that is both visionary and practical. Our model for space-oriented economic activity should include not just tourism but development and testing of aerospace technology, expansion of support functions, and continued improvement of our area as a desirable place to live.

We must also expand local branding to include Spaceport America. Las Cruces and Doña Ana County should be as well known for our long association with space technology as we are for great chili, NMSU, and national monuments.

That done we have to walk the talk. The southern approach to the spaceport is a case in point. The existing interchange on I-25 and a 23-mile dirt road are no way to greet visitors or attract businesses. Better access from Doña Ana County to Spaceport America must be made if our area is to compete in the space industry.

And finally, spaceport taxes used for education should be reprogrammed to include a wider range of activities, student needs, and providers. Currently all space-related educational spending is distributed to three school districts for science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) courses at the middle or high school level.

Each of the preceding four actions is essential to fulfilling the promise of the spaceport. Space-oriented branding, business planning, vehicular access, and classroom-to-career education are simply not getting done. Bits and pieces may be in the works, but significant gaps remain and the pace is too slow.

Take education. STEM programs administered by school districts are admirable but by themselves are not adequate in this context. The spaceport tax should improve employment opportunities for every child, not just those with an aptitude for STEM classwork. Space-oriented businesses need a well-educated work force to fill a wide range of position: from rocket scientists to machinists, accountants to medical specialists, and truck drivers to world-class restaurant staff.

Enrichment programs should expose every kid to the wonders of space and the possibility of being part of the space industry. A variety of sources could provide these enrichment programs. And we must not forget that many students will not make the transition from high school to a space-related career without financial assistance for college.

In summary, if our community is going to maximize local benefits from the spaceport GRT, we must devote more time and resources to development of a local space industry and we must address the full range of issues associated with preparing students for space-related jobs.

Thoughtful decisions about the \$2M available each year for “space-related projects” should provide most of the necessary funds. The bulk of these monies ought to be used for educational programs, much as it is now, with a small percentage being set aside for business development. Where additional funds are needed, every effort should be made to leverage state or federal programs and private investment.

The spaceport promise remains compelling but unfulfilled. Adjustments are needed. Only we can close the gaps our children face between their classrooms and the possibility of space-related careers right here in Doña Ana County.