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Forum explores economic impacts of spaceport

By Diana M. Alba Sun-News reporter

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LAS CRUCES - Jeanette Pruett of Radium Springs and her daughter, Angie McLaughlin, don't have direct ties to the aerospace industry.

Still, Pruett, an active member of her community association, and McLaughlin, a bilingual teacher in Alamogordo, say they see economic potential in the proposal to establish a spaceport community in southern Sierra County.

"It's time for this area to grow, and I think we need to be providing everything we need to provide" to make it successful, Pruett said. "The public needs to be aware this is so close; it's exciting."

Their interest prompted them to attend the Leonard R. Sugerman Public Forum on Tuesday morning - a free event connected with this week's International Symposium for Personal and Commercial Spaceflight in Las Cruces.

In all, 110 people attended, said Judy McShannon, associate director of the New Mexico Space Grant Consortium, the nonprofit that runs the symposium. That's up from last year's 80 attendees, she said.

Three panel discussions featured local government officials, a contractor involved with the spaceport, public school officials, spaceport-related companies, economic development groups and a

New Mexico State University engineering professor, among others.

Davin Lopez, director of the Mesilla Valley Economic Development Alliance, told attendees that the spaceport is a "long-term venture" and surrounding industry will take time to establish.

"It's very important from a government role that we understand that momentum and support has to cross over administrations," he said. "The city, the county and taxpayers have been incredible in getting the ball rolling, but it's really just the beginning; we need the momentum to carry on."

The \$200 million, state-owned Spaceport America is being constructed about 45 miles north of Las Cruces. It's proposed as a launch site for commercial space vehicles.

The project has seen its share of opponents, many of whom feel the venture is too risky and a poor use of taxpayer money.

Several speakers noted there's potential to increase tourism, considering the project has garnered much national and international attention. Steve Landeene, executive director for the New Mexico Spaceport Authority, said the agency plans to begin offering Spaceport America "hard hat tours," starting in December, to promote tourism.

Meanwhile, other presenters said attention will have to be paid to boosting aerospace education locally, so graduates are able to compete for the jobs eventually generated by the spaceport. School officials said they're working on plans to do that.

McLaughlin, the Alamogordo bilingual teacher, said she sees the spaceport as a way to spark students' interest.

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"The sky is the limit now," she said. "To bring that to kids and inspire them is exactly what I want to do."

Brienna Henwood, business development and marketing manager for the Pennsylvania-based NASTAR Center, was among the presenters. She said her company, which trains space travelers using flight simulator equipment, said her company is considering establishing what she calls a "NASTAR lite" in southern New Mexico - a scaled-down version of its main training facility.

Henwood was on the lookout for potential clients, possibly among researchers.

"I'm kind of putting the question back out to you: How do we maximize the use of this equipment so we can put a center here?" she said.

Landeene said generally such symposiums don't offer free events like the Sugerman Forum, one reason the event is unique.

JoeHenry Armendariz, a Do-a Ana County native and an engineer at White Sands Test Facility, said he attended the forum because he's interested in seeing the spaceport industry succeed.

"All the conditions are ideal for this to really take off," he said. "What I think the community needs to do is get behind it and put some faith in it and not just sit on the sidelines."

The two-day symposium begins in earnest today at the New Mexico Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum. The at-the-door registration cost is \$445 per person.

Diana M. Alba can be reached at dalba@lcsun-news.com ; (575) 541-5443.

If you go

What: International Symposium for Personal and Commercial Spaceflight

When: today and Thursday

Where: New Mexico Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum, 4100 Dripping Springs Road

Cost: Registration is \$445 at the door. Single-day registration can also be purchased, and there are discounts for active military members and students.

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