

Plan for New Mexico's spaceport up in the air

By The Associated Press

UPHAM, N.M. — Billionaire Richard Branson looks at a bleak and featureless expanse of the New Mexico desert and sees the perfect spot on which to build the future — a \$198 million launch complex that would blast paying tourists into space.

Whether enough folks around here share his vision remains to be seen.

Spaceport America, as sketched out by Branson, would be funded by state, local and federal money. The first rocket flights would be in 2009 and would initially be suborbital trips that would offer five minutes of weightlessness at about \$200,000 per person. Eventually, the spaceport could offer trips into orbit and beyond.

But in poor southern New Mexico's ranching country, some say they have no intention of paying for some rich people's thrills.

On Tuesday, residents of Dona Ana County voted on a proposed quarter-cent sales tax increase critical to the project. The tax increase, which would raise a projected \$49 million, led by a mere 238 votes out of 17,168 cast, with 541 provisional ballots still to be counted. A final count is expected today.

"I do not see any reason that every time I buy a dress for my wife I should have to pay more taxes," grumbled George Gandara, a 63-year-old business owner in Las Cruces, about 60 miles south of the spaceport site. Carol Garcia, 52, of Las Cruces, said: "It's just a rich man's dream that he needs us to help pay for. If it's your dream, build it yourself."

Rick Homans, New Mexico's economic development director, said he was expecting a wider margin of victory.

"On one hand, there is a healthy skepticism and a great deal of caution about the project," he said. "And on the other hand, there is a lot of optimism for what it could do for the state."

Will Whitehorn, a spokesman for Branson's Virgin Galactic in London, said Wednesday that the company would not comment until all the

ballots had been counted. But Homans said the defeat of the tax increase would probably doom the project.

"Realistically, the project would unravel, very likely," he said.

State leaders, including Democratic presidential hopeful Gov. Bill Richardson, who toured the area last week in a late-hour push for tax, have pinned southern New Mexico's economic fate on the spaceport. Homans said the project would do no less than mark New Mexico as "the birthplace of the second space age."

The 27-square-mile site, which would be near White Sands Missile Range, where the U.S. launched its first rocket after World War II, would

include a 10,000-foot runway with adjoining terminals and hangars. The big runway would be able to handle the kinds of planes that take space-ships up to 60,000 feet, where they could then be

launched. There also would be an area to launch rockets vertically.

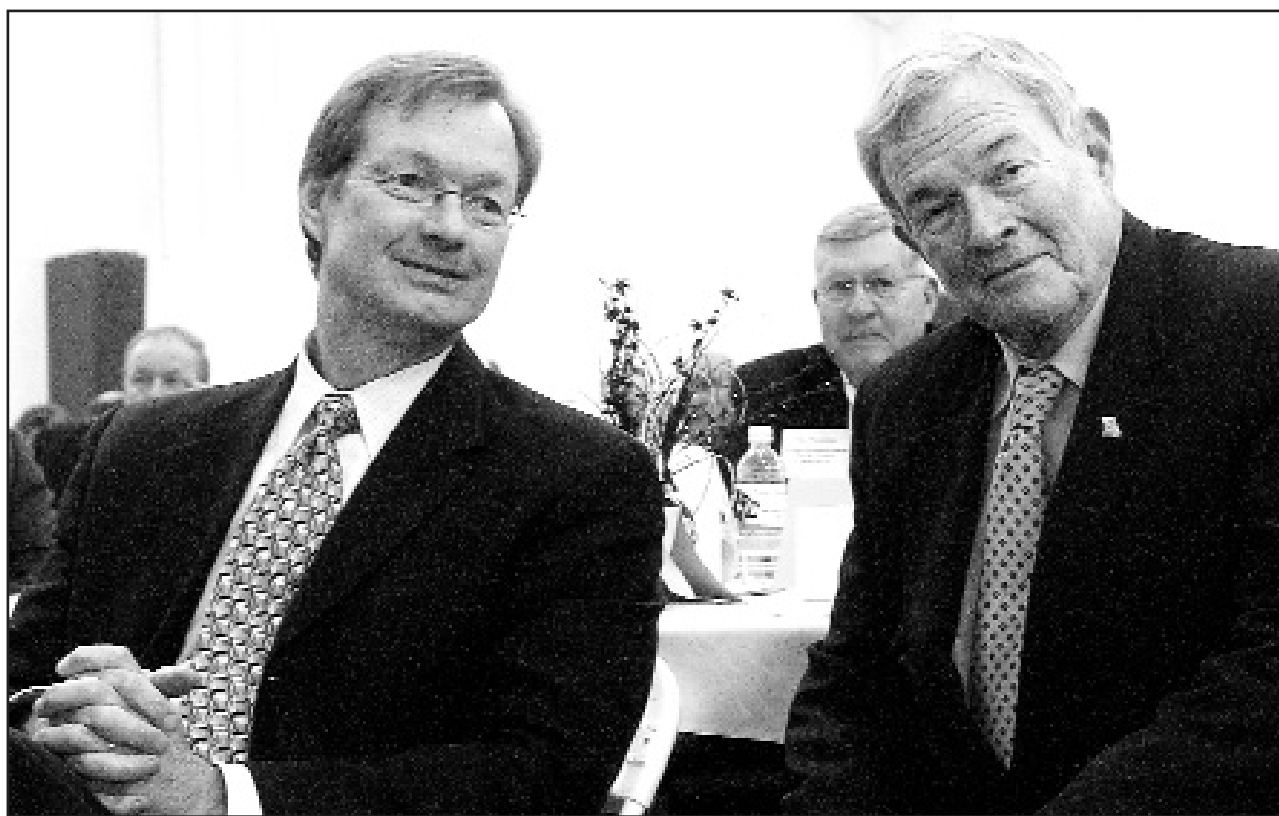
Under the plan, Branson's Virgin Galactic would move its headquarters from London, along with some 200 employees. The hope is that the project would stimulate manufacturing and research in nearby cities such as Las Cruces and Truth or Consequences.

"The premise is that once space becomes accessible, then all sorts of things will happen in space and on the moon, and there's going to be a whole industry that supports it," Homans said.

Branson has said he chose the southern New Mexico desert as a launch site because of the weather, the large expanse of open desert and the support of the state.

"We're about to embark on a wonderful adventure. ... We're going where no one has gone before. There's no model to follow, nothing to copy," Branson said in 2005.

While Branson and New Mexico are pushing forward, they are racing against Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos and others to make their dreams a reality.



U.S. Rep. Kenny Hulshof, R-Columbia, Mo., left, and U.S. Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond, R-Mexico, Mo., listen as Bond's speech at the Tri-State Development Summit is introduced. The two gave updates on federal legislation for the crowd of about 430 regional leaders.

H-W Photo/Michael Kipley

Action

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infrastructure and regional issues. He said the Water Resources Development Act has an excellent chance of passing this year — the sixth year Congress has worked on it. The legislation would provide \$1.95 billion for lock upgrades at five Mississippi River sites and two on the Illinois River. Another \$1.7 billion would go for environmental upgrades.

"Our locks can now officially qualify for the National Register of Historic Places" because many were built 70 years or more ago, Bond said jokingly.

Ethanol mandates require billions of gallons of use in U.S. cars by 2012, but thanks to a flurry of new refinery construction, Bond believes the nation will hit its ethanol use targets two or three years early. That's good for grain farmers, but it is causing some concern for livestock farmers who will pay a higher price for feed.

Highway and infrastructure topics were important after the directors of transportation departments in all three states said they face funding shortfalls and a future focus primarily on maintenance — unless new revenues are identified.

U.S. Rep. Kenny Hulshof, R-Columbia, said the summit is "progress in action" and has captured attention in distant places.

"This is unique, to have regions that typically in competition, working with each other," Hulshof said.

Hulshof said other things set regional people apart. In Northeast Missouri, he noted that voters were willing to help pay for

TRI-STATE DEVELOPMENT SUMMIT TASK FORCE REPORTS

TRANSPORTATION: Seventy-five percent of the highway priorities identified at the first summit in 1996 have been completed or are under construction. There are 370 miles of priorities remaining. The Hannibal bypass, Macomb bypass are recognized by state transportation officials, but are not scheduled for construction at this time.

RIVER ISSUES: "We are no better equipped to manage an event of the magnitude of the great flood of '93 than we were in '93," said part of the task force report. Members support levee district upgrades and flood preparations as well as the addition of 1,200-foot lock chambers and the end of an experimental "spring rise" management of the Missouri River.

TOURISM: Experts forecast a strong tourism season this spring and fall, said Katherine Walker, chairman of the tourism task force. A travel brochure will be published this year, highlighting attractions throughout the Tri-State region. Several other unified tourism efforts are under way.

AGRICULTURE: Agri-tourism sites will be added to travel brochures and Web sites this year. Summit members also are publicizing the need for fresh and local products.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: Local education facilities are coordinating with employers to create classes that will prepare potential employees.

MEDIA: Jack Whitaker, chairman of the media task force, said the group's top goal is to foster strong educational efforts on major regional initiatives.

HOUSING: Carla Potts said the mission is to provide affordable workforce housing in the Tri-State area. Housing stock is aging and the lack of housing can limit a community's growth potential, she said.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP: Chuck Betts, chairman of the task force, said communities need to focus more on their home-grown entrepreneurs. There is great growth potential with small employers.

CONNECTIVITY: Telephone, Internet and other communications sectors are working together to offer emergency service if something causes an outage in a nearby region. High-speed Internet service also is a priority.

EMERGENCY RESPONSE: Agencies in nearby counties and states are looking for ways to offer a coordinated response in case of emergencies.

highway projects they know are necessary. That shows they know the connection between infrastructure investments and economic development.

Kirkville voters approved a sales tax in 2002 that allowed for accelerated construction of U.S. 63 as a four-lane highway between Macon and Kirkville. Then Marion, Monroe, Shelby and Macon county voters approved a similar tax to ensure that U.S. 36 is built no later than 2010.

Hulshof said there are other important types of infrastructure, such as housing, water supply and wastewater facilities and other things that are necessities

for growth.

Other speakers talked about high-speed Internet and telephone lines.

Thomas A. Oakley concluded the afternoon session with a salute to all those who helped create a long list of successes since the first summit. He said many of the summit task force goals have been accomplished.

"When we realize where we've come from and where we started" it's amazing, Oakley said.

He urged the 35 counties never to give up speaking with one voice on important issues.

Jim Mentesti smiled as he answered reporter questions

after the seventh summit. Mentesti, president of the Great River Economic Development Foundation, spearheaded the previous summits and his office continues to work in tandem with Crow.

Mentesti said having a full-time coordinator gives the summit a more stable future. But he wants to see the summit accomplish goals, not just meet.

"I think the critical thing is to accept the challenges of the task forces" and work for change, Mentesti said.

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Wet, heavy spring snow blankets upper Northeast

By The Associated Press

CONCORD, N.H. — A spring storm brought more than a foot of snow to parts of the upper Northeast, closing schools, tangling traffic and knocking out power to more than 100,000 homes and businesses today.

At least one death was blamed on the wintry weather, which was expected to continue through the weekend.

By early this morning, areas of Maine already had nearly a foot and a half of wet, heavy snow, and central New Hampshire saw 16 inches in spots. Up to a foot fell in Vermont, and

upstate New York had several inches as well.

The spring snow followed a winter that was often unusually warm.

"We had Easter on December 25th. People had crocuses coming out and blooms on bushes. And now we have Christmas, with all this snow," said meteorologist Butch Roberts of the National Weather Service in Gray, Maine. "It's a little topsyturvy sometimes."

Utility crews worked through the night and into Thursday trying to restore electricity to more than 80,000 homes and businesses in New Hampshire after

the snow took down tree limbs — and power lines.

Damage was widespread, and there was no estimate of when electricity might be restored, said Martin Murray, spokesman for Public Service Company of New Hampshire.

Central Maine Power reported that more than 24,000 customers without electricity, mainly in the Alfred area, and Vermont had about 1,300 outages.

The heavy, wet snow clogged roads early today, prompting school officials to cancel or delay classes around the region.

A man was killed in New Hampshire when his car ran off

Interstate 93 and hit a tree during the storm Wednesday night on the Canterbury-Concord line, state police said.

A tractor-trailer carrying oxygen bottles skidded and rolled over Wednesday night on the Everett Turnpike in Merrimack. Bottles rolled out, and it took crews all night to clear the road, though none of the bottles broke. The driver was hospitalized with non-life-threatening injuries.

Cars were also reported off the road in Maine, and police said a traffic death Wednesday on a slippery road in Topsham may have been weather-related.

Beardstown

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counterfeits were available in Chicago and providing them information for false identities.

It was not immediately clear whether anyone arrested Wednesday had attorneys. A message left at QSI's headquarters in Chattanooga, Tenn., was not immediately returned.

About 100 QSI cleaning employees worked at the Cargill Meat Solutions plant, which can process up to 18,000 hogs a day, said Cargill spokesman Mark

Klein. Klein said the Wayzata, Minn.-based agribusiness powerhouse cooperated with immigration officials and is serious about following hiring laws for its 2,200 workers at the plant.

Diego Bonesatti, spokesman for the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, said a community meeting was scheduled Wednesday evening to answer questions from Beardstown's large Latino population. He called for a moratorium on such raids until Congress sets a new immigration policy.

Plant

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worldwide. DURA has 28 locations in North America and 42 more locations worldwide.

The company also is selling its jack, and hinge and latch businesses, meaning those facilities in Butler, Ind., and Mancelona, Mich., are for sale.

DURA Automotive Systems is an independent designer and manufacturer of driver control

systems, seating control systems, glass systems, engineered assemblies, structural door modules and exterior trim systems for the global automotive industry, recreation vehicles and specialty vehicle industries.

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