



Business

Rocket company's plans include Volusia County, exec says

By Clayton Park

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Volusia County lost its bid to land Blue Origin a few years ago, but at Team Volusia's annual meeting Thursday night an executive for the private rocket company said Volusia could someday become the site of some of its launches.

DAYTONA BEACH — Volusia County's bid to land Blue Origin a few years ago failed, but on Thursday an executive for the private rocket company said the county is still in its growth plans.

"We're going to launch something from this county before it's all said and done," said Scott Henderson, Florida site director for Blue Origin.

Henderson made the comment at the annual meeting for Team Volusia Economic Development Corporation held at Daytona State College on Thursday. He is also the company's vice president of test and flight operations.

Blue Origin in September 2015 announced its decision to build its Florida manufacturing plant and launch pad at Cape Canaveral Air Force Base.

But the Kent, Washington-based company remains interested in someday adding a commercial launch site "outside the fences, away from the federal bureaucracy," Henderson said.

His remarks drew cheers from the audience.

The 280 people that filled the banquet hall included business and community leaders and local government officials.

Blue Origin is owned by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos.

The private rocket company received strong pitches from several states during its search for a site, Henderson said.

North Carolina officials even offered to change the "First in Flight" slogan on its vehicle license plates to add the word "Again," he said.

Blue Origin chose Cape Canaveral because it was the fastest place to get the company's rocket operations off the ground thanks to its former NASA launch pads, Henderson said.

"I've got to tell you there are lots of advantages to looking at a site like Volusia offered, which was the Shiloh site," he said.

The company envisions its Cape Canaveral operations growing to include facilities at other nearby locations, Henderson said.

Volusia is just a short drive away, he noted.

Blue Origin expects to grow its Florida operations as its prepares to launch bigger rockets, he said.

The company is developing a rocket that will have double cargo room than any currently in use, he said.

The rocket is named New Glenn after famed astronaut John Glenn, the first American to orbit Earth.

The target date for the first launch is late 2021 or early 2022.

The New Glenn will be the first rocket to be manufactured, launched and refurbished in Florida, he said.

The rocket also will be reusable.

“Where the real money is made in this business is not the rocket, it’s what goes on top: lunar landers, space ships, orbital habitats (and) factories,” Henderson said.

That’s where Volusia County could greatly benefit.

“You can build (what the New Glenn carries) anywhere in the local vicinity,” he said.

“That’s why we chose (Cape Canaveral) because we can see that concentric ring (of related businesses) build.”

Henderson did not elaborate on his comments regarding potential Blue Origin rocket launches from Volusia County.

County Council member Deb Denys said Henderson’s speech “took me by surprise with glee.”

The possibility of Volusia becoming home to a commercial rocket launch site “is always in play,” she said.

One advantage for companies such as Blue Origin would be avoiding having a rocket launch canceled because of a federal government shutdown, she said.

“It fits beautifully into what Volusia County wants to do which is to capture the supply-chain businesses that support the commercial aerospace industry,” Denys said.

One potential site for aerospace suppliers in Volusia is the 435 acres of county-owned undeveloped land at the south end of Daytona Beach International Airport.

On Tuesday, the County Council unanimously approved a special designation of the property to shorten the time it takes to obtain a building permit for aerospace and aviation manufacturers.

“They (the County Council) want us poised and ready if we are contacted by anyone, be it Blue Origin or any other company associated with the aerospace or aviation industries,” said Clay Ervin, the county’s director of growth and resource development.

“It could potentially knock off six months to shorten (permit approvals) to three to six months,” he said.

Airport Director Rick Karl said Blue Origin considered building a rocket engine factory on the airport’s south parcel before choosing Huntsville, Alabama, in 2017.

The likely deciding factor? Alabama’s dangling of more than \$50 million in economic incentives, according to a Seattle Times report.

That far exceeded Florida’s \$9 million offer, Karl said.

“We’ve maintained a relationship with Blue Origin so when the time is right we can move quickly to satisfy their needs,” Karl said.

Team Volusia CEO Keith Norden said, “We’re becoming more and more competitive for aviation and aerospace projects.

“We’re perfectly poised for development opportunities,” he said.

Henderson at Thursday’s dinner praised Team Volusia.

The public/private partnership group was formed 10 years ago to recruit companies to Volusia County.

The economic development group over the years has raised questions from some in the community regarding its effectiveness.

Team Volusia has also drawn criticism for keeping the public in the dark regarding companies it recruits despite relying on taxpayer money for roughly half of its \$1.08 million annual budget.

The rest of its funding comes from businesses and private donors.

“I’ve got to tell you, and I’m not just blowing smoke at you, Team Volusia is the best organization to work with,” Henderson said.

“It didn’t work out in the end (to land Blue Origin’s rocket factory), but you guys really brought your ‘A’ game.”

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