

A spaceport — even one that might not be operational for a decade or more — is just what aerospace and economic development experts say is needed in Colorado.

Proposed for Front Range Airport near Watkins, the spaceport has the potential to attract new companies and high-paying jobs to the state.

"It would be another star in our sky," said Tom Clark, executive vice president of the Metro Denver Economic Development Corp.

Colorado already has the No. 2 space economy in the country — behind only California — with a diverse industry comprised of commercial, private and military endeavors.

Opportunities and the impact posed by the transformation of Front Range Airport into a spaceport haven't been studied yet, so specifics are lacking.

However, some companies already have told Clark and Elaine Thorndike, chief executive of the Colorado Association for Manufacturing and Technology, that a spaceport is what they need to relocate here.

"Companies that are either suppliers to the commercial space market or part of the aerospace sector in general are extremely excited," said Thorndike, who is directing development of the Aerospace and Clean Energy Park on the former Hewlett-Packard/Agilent campus in Loveland. A spaceport fits neatly with the park's goal of accelerating space and clean-tech technologies.

Using a spaceport to attract companies is based "on a concept of: If you come, we will build it," Clark said.

On Oct. 31, Gov. John Hickenlooper formally asked the Federal Aviation Administration, which regulates spaceports, to designate Colorado as a "spaceport state."

The designation, which would allow a facility offering suborbital tourism, travel and cargo transport from one point to another on Earth, could come near the end of 2012.

A year and a half ago, Clark said Colorado didn't need a spaceport, with the first "purpose-built" commercial spaceport already rising a day's drive down Interstate 25 in New Mexico.

"Once there is one of those launch facilities in the neighborhood, it doesn't make that much sense to build another one," Clark said at the time.

What has changed, Clark said last week, "is the technology."

No vertical launches are planned at Front Range, unlike most of the other eight certified U.S. spaceports. Instead, space planes — an emerging technology — will use regular runways and jet engines to take off and land, switching to rocket power above 50,000 feet.

Front Range offers a nearly clean slate with 4,000 acres of on-airport property that can be developed, and another 6,000 acres adjacent to the airport that are in an aviation-influence zone.

A space-plane pilot training school on the airport property is being discussed between Rocket Crafters of Utah and Spartan College of Aeronautics and Technology of Oklahoma.

Front Range aviation director Dennis Heap envisions services that will be needed in the surrounding area such as hotels, shopping, gas stations, parking lots and restaurants.

"That's what starts turning the economic engines," Heap said.

Adams County Economic Development is forming an aerospace and aviation task force to start going over issues.

"Contracting with a local economist is something we need to put on the radar for a study of what the potentials are," said Barry Gore, chief executive of Adams County Economic Development. "We don't want to make any grandiose presumptions."

But, Gore added, "from people in the industry, we've heard that we've got a winner with Denver International Airport nearby and workforce availability. The spaceport really raises the visibility of Front Range Airport that businesses hadn't considered before."

Patty Silverstein, an economist with Development Research Partners in Jefferson County, does a number of metro area economic development studies.

While she hasn't been hired to do a spaceport study, Silverstein said advantages she would consider include the federal funding it would bring and the strong concentration of aerospace and aviation employment in the metro area.

"With budget constraints on a federal level, companies are looking at commercialization of their services, since that's where the capital is," Silverstein said.

To look at a possible economic scenario, Spaceport America near Las Cruces, N.M., was certified as a spaceport in 2008 and is now starting to pay off the state's investment, said spaceport executive director Christine Anderson.

Virgin Galactic, which is headquartered there, plans to take space tourists aloft in 2013. Over the next 20 years, Virgin Galactic will pay New Mexico \$150 million to \$250 million in lease payments.

Revenues also have begun flowing from vertical launch companies UP Aerospace of Highlands Ranch and Armadillo Aerospace of Texas.

During construction, about 1,000 people worked at the spaceport.

The business plan calls for about 500 jobs in the next three years. Virgin Galactic should have 200 to 300 jobs in 2013 as its first space tourism flight takes off.

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