

## Opinion: Sky isn't only limit to dream of spaceport at Atlantic City International

Some state legislators want to see if Atlantic City International Airport can aim higher — about 43 miles higher.

They've introduced a bipartisan bill that would create a state commission to study the feasibility of getting the airport a license to also host launches into space. Sen. Chris Brown, one of the chief sponsors, said it would explore the possibility of combining the push for aviation-related development near the airport and the FAA William J. Hughes Technical Center with the region's dominant tourism industry.

A breakthrough to a better future sometimes starts as a dream, and this one isn't purely a flight of fancy. There is a possibility, however small, that someday private spacecraft technology and individual and commercial demand could make the airport an attractive launch site. Current factors, though, are sufficient to bring such a vision back to Earth.

ACY probably could never get licensed for vertical rocket launches, the kind used by industry leaders SpaceX of Elon Musk and Blue Origin of Jeff Bezos. Rockets carry a lot of highly volatile fuel to attain orbit and would pose an unacceptably high risk to nearby populated areas, which is why they're launched at sea or from isolated facilities.

The airport would be seeking a license to operate a launch site for suborbital vehicles that take off down a runway like an airplane, or on the back of an airplane and then release and fire their engine aloft. Either type then lands like an airplane, gliding or under power.

None of the first type of space plane is currently under development (the last, Rocketplane Global, went bankrupt in 2010). A piggyback space plane, however, has been successfully tested by Virgin Galactic, which hopes to begin offering 90-minute flights to as high as 50 miles this summer. More than 600 people from 58 countries have put down deposits of \$200,000 to \$250,000 for such rides.

Virgin Galactic's flights will be hosted by Spaceport America in New Mexico, a facility built with \$220 million in public money several years ago. Last month, billionaire Richard Branson's company agreed to partner with the United Arab Emirates, a big investor in Virgin Galactic, to build and operate a spaceport in Abu Dhabi.

It's probably already too late to get a piece of the Virgin space plane action, unless very expensive short thrill rides into near-space are much more popular than anticipated. Getting a launch site operator's license from the FAA's Office of Commercial Space Transportation takes years. The general aviation airport in Adams County, Colorado, received a license last year just for simple space planes, not the piggyback kind, after several years of work by local and airport officials. It joins three other U.S. spaceports that haven't had a space launch, out of 11 license holders total in the nation.

Getting the spaceport license is only the start. Those using a spaceport would need a launch license, which then takes into consideration additional safety factors such as potential conflicts with airport operations and interference with airline flight paths.

The bill would create a nine-member commission to study the feasibility of getting ACY a spaceport license and would require airport owner South Jersey Transportation Authority to pay for the study as well as provide administrative assistance and support. Then a report would be due to the governor and Legislature within a year of the bill becoming law.

This seems unnecessarily bureaucratic. Private companies have done feasibility studies for other would-be spaceports. Before the state spends to create another government entity, someone (maybe the SJTA) should find out how much it would cost to simply have a company with such experience examine the space feasibility of ACY. That seems like it would be a cheaper, quicker and reliable reality check.