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Shuttle Could Land at March Field Museum

It's in the hands of NASA.

Representatives of the March Joint Powers Authority and the March Field Air Museum recently submitted an exhaustive proposal to NASA outlining why a space shuttle orbiter should be relocated to the Inland Empire when the last mission is flown.

The March museum is making a run to land an orbiter when the shuttle program is scheduled to end in 2010.

Should the space agency grant the museum's request, backers of the plan say bringing an orbiter to Riverside County would give visitors and out-of-this-world experience in space flight while putting the Inland region in the stratosphere.

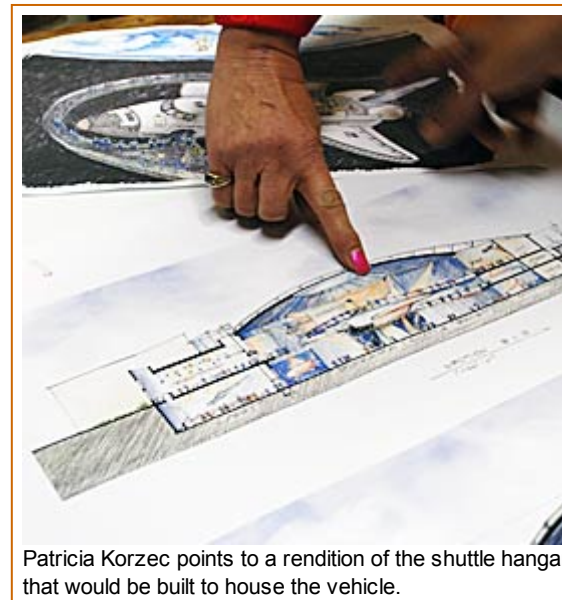
"It would take us to an unbelievably new level," said Perris City Councilman Mark Yarbrough, who is serving also as chairman of the March Joint Powers Commission, a panel made up of elected officials which oversees the Joint Powers Authority. "This is the ultimate technology and it belongs here in the region with one of the largest populations in the U.S. There is simply no better spot for it. If we get this, the sky will be the limit—literally. People I run into ask me all the time whether we are going to get the shuttle. They're even blogging about it. To me that says the level of excitement and anticipation is sky high."

NASA remains tight-lipped about which museums will receive the three shuttle vehicles once the program ends and there is no word on when that decision will be announced.

One orbiter, Discovery, is set to go to the Smithsonian Institute.

That leaves orbiters Endeavour and Atlantis available for other aviation museums. As many as a dozen are believed to have submitted proposals. March museum director Patricia Korzec said she would like to see Endeavour come to the air field museum because local astronaut Tracy Caldwell, a Beaumont High School graduate who flew aboard it in 1987.

Korzec and Carey Allen, secretary to the March Joint Powers Commission, compiled the 25-page report, which took five weeks to research, write and send to NASA.



Patricia Korzec points to a rendition of the shuttle hangar that would be built to house the vehicle.



March Field Air Museum director Patricia Korzec, project supporter Jamil Dada and Perris City Councilman Mark Yarbrough review application sketches submitted to NASA to bring a shuttle orbiter to Riverside County.



A model of the shuttle; March supporters hope their proposal convinces NASA to place the real deal at March Field museum.

The document required the museum and Joint Powers Authority to explain how they would bring the orbiter here, how locating it in Riverside County would benefit the nation and how they would display the vehicle. She said the shuttle orbiter could be flown into adjacent March Air Reserve Base on top of a 747-jet and ferried to the museum without disrupting freeway traffic or requiring nearby power lines to be lowered. The shuttle would attract many of the 20 million residents living in Southern California, from school kids to retirees to the 600,000 military veterans living in Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

And as far as the experience, the museum contacted architect John Loomis, who designed renovations for the Perris City Council Chambers and Depot Building, to create some drawings for submission to NASA. Loomis' plans call for the shuttle to be housed in a glass-paneled structure.

The shuttle would sit about 30 to 40 feet below ground level in its own hangar. Visitors would enter on a circular walkway at ground level they observe the vehicle up-close. Part of the exhibit would be painted black to mimic the emptiness of deep space, while projectors would show the earth as it spins in its orbit around the sun.

"The effect would like taking a spacewalk," Korzec said.

She said an IMAX theater would help complete the multi-sensory tour. The shuttle hangar might also include a full-size replica of the crew's quarters. NASA restrictions prohibit any from entering the shuttle vehicle.

"I think the experience would be literally breath-taking," Loomis said. "It will all be part of our vision to tell the story of the space shuttle. It will certainly become a world-class exhibit."

The experience likely won't come cheap.

Some estimates put the cost of flying, landing and exhibiting an orbiter at more than \$40 million. But Jamil Dada, president of the March Field Air Museum Foundation and a longtime Riverside County booster, said sufficient funds will become available should the museum receive a shuttle.

"People will line up to donate," Dada said. "Funding will be easy because of the huge impact the shuttle will have on this region. Private foundations, businesses and the government will come to donate." Heavy hitters already are throwing their weight behind the efforts.

Timothy White, chancellor of the University of California, Riverside, said in his letter of support that

"Southern California is the aerospace capital of our nation and is home to NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Northrop Grumman and thousands of other aerospace companies."

"This physical presence has the potential to inspire and engage students to pursue studies leading to career fields with strong grounding in science, mathematics, engineering, or technology—21st Century knowledge centered (on) workforce skills which are critical to the region's, state's and the Nation's economic competitiveness."

U.S. Rep. Ken Calvert, R-Corona, said the shuttle would "provide new opportunities for Southern California's youth to become more interested and engaged in science and America's space program through educational classes and school tours."

"In these tough economic times, the economic impact and heightened tourism for the region would also be welcomed," Calvert wrote to NASA.

Calvert said the March museum has successfully organized other major events in recent years which brought national praise and acclaim. Last weekend, the second gathering of former pilots and crew members who flew and maintained the SR-71 "blackbird" spy plane took place, bringing more than 3,000 visitors to the museum. The museum also has attracted attention with its exhibit detailing the Soviet Union's rise to prominence in the Space Race.

Next year, the museum will become home to the national memorial for the Distinguished Flying Cross Society.

"The March Field Air Museum has reached new levels of professionalism," Calvert wrote.