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Road to life on Red Planet may start in Titusville

Corp. foresees tourism, mining

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A small, forward-looking company has offered to share the wealth of Mars with Titusville.

4Frontiers Corp. is asking the Titusville City Council to allow more than \$745,000 in tax breaks to help the company attract investors and set up a shop where it would provide Earth-bound folks with a taste of the Martian experience.

"We consider ourselves the world authority on Mars settlements," said Mark Homnick, a 50-year-old former mechanical engineer, who graduated from Penn State in 1980 and works out of his New Port Richey home.

The company takes its name from the four frontiers of Earth, the moon, Mars and the asteroids.

Homnick wants to be in the first wave of entrepreneurs to develop tourism and mining on the red planet.

"We decided no one was looking at long-term habitation," Homnick said. "Ultimately, it will form into a paying business."

On a site off State Road 407, 4Frontiers envisions a corporate headquarters. It also wants to have another facility nearby that would house interactive displays and a science-based Mars settlement replica that would be open to the public for admission.

The two projects combined are projected to cost more than \$35 million.

An enthusiastic Titusville City Council unanimously approved having a public hearing next month on the proposed 70 percent tax abatement for seven years.

A visit to Mars could be decades away, especially since NASA's Mars exploration research has been put on hold, because of funding problems. But until it reaches Mars, the company plans to sell its knowledge and dreams of Mars to the paying public.

4Frontiers already has brought in some revenue by selling Mars-themed literature and merchandise through its Web site. The company also has found a niche, conducting insider tours of NASA installations, such as the Johnson Space Center.

It hopes to be profitable by 2010.

The company must raise \$35 million to complete the project in a time when investors are wary and credit is tight.

"We're a tenacious bunch," Homnick said.

Additionally, the company said it will apply for grants from Space Florida and has had an introductory meeting with the state agency, Deb Spicer, a Space Florida vice president, confirmed.

"We're looking forward to continuing the discussion," Spicer said.

The Titusville City Council -- seeing a potential space-themed attraction and jobs -- hopes to encourage the company.

Councilman Walt Johnson said he talked with representatives of the company in 2005, in his former capacity as the city's economic development director. The company then was focused on raising money to build the project.

Even though the proposal might seem a little far-fetched, Johnson said the company appeared stable.

"You get a lot of phone calls that seem like pie in the sky," he said. "This wasn't pie in the sky."

But it's not a sure thing, either.

The company, with a yearly budget of about \$250,000, has three employees and 40 advisers, including astronaut Buzz Aldrin, who in 1969 became the second person to set foot on the moon.

4Frontiers picked Titusville to be near the Kennedy Space Center.

But the company had to be convinced to accept the locations the city had in mind. Two properties for the projects -- one near Interstate 95 and State Road 407, and another at the Space Coast Regional Airport -- didn't seem as visible as the company would have liked, said Matt Chesnut, Titusville's economic development director.

One parcel is privately owned; the other is owned by the Titusville-Cocoa Airport Authority.

After weekly phone calls for months, Chesnut convinced company executives they could attract visitors with signs along Interstate 95.

"They really have the desire to be on the Space Coast, somewhere close to NASA," he said.

City officials hope 4Frontiers in Titusville could create spin-off, high-tech businesses that would add jobs to a community that might suffer from cuts to the shuttle program, now scheduled to end in 2010.

Those businesses could create clusters -- similar companies grouped together -- creating economic and intellectual synergy, Chesnut said.

"To have some sort of research and development area is a good thing," he said. "You're developing different projects and different ideas, and it will draw people with different specialization."

Nothing, however, is a done deal.

The Economic Development Commission of Florida's Space Coast still is researching "their needs for a competitive business location," according to a statement by its president and chief executive officer, Lynda Weatherman.

"It certainly is a unique premise and has the potential to complement our proactive space message," she said.

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