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St. Petersburg Times

Their Mars mission is set to blast off

By Lisa Buie, Times Staff Writer
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An artist's rendering of a tourist attraction planned in Titusville that will be a fully immersive, simulated Mars environment in which guests will be confronted with challenges to overcome in one-day or multi-day experiences.

[Special to the Times]

NEW PORT RICHEY — Remember the people who said the moon landing was a hoax?

A New Port Richey company hopes to create a simulated trip to Mars that everyone will know is fake but will appear as realistic as possible.

"This is not Disney World or Universal Studios," said Mark Homnick, 52, one of the managers of NewSpace Center LLC.

The company has submitted site plans for a 75-acre lot in Titusville on Florida's Space Coast to build Interspace, a space-themed entertainment and research facility that would include the simulated Martian environment. The men estimated the project will cost about \$30-million and said their plans began in 2005.

Homnick and his vice president, Joseph Palaia, run the company and its parent, 4Frontiers, out of Homnick's waterfront stilt home. In the garage sits a black Pontiac Firebird with the license tag MARS 001. Homnick, who retired to New Port Richey after a career as a mechanical engineer for Intel Corp., said he first got interested in space travel as a spellbound 12-year-old who watched the moon landing in 1969.

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Inside the house on Wednesday, the two men showed off their plans on a 42-inch computer monitor. Their presentation included artists' renderings of a high-tech registration center, with information on multiple screens.

Tourists could choose to buy one day "explorer" passes for \$100 or so that would get them a "trip" to Mars and a peek at the surface environment from an indoor building. Those willing to spend somewhere in the neighborhood of \$3,500 could stay for a few days as "settlers" and play roles on Mars such as miner, greenhouse gardener or artist. Settlers would have to wear simulated space suits while on the surface. After registration, guests would be taken to a training center to prepare for a simulated space flight.



[CHERIE DIEZ | Times (2006)]
Joe Palaia, left, and Mark Homnick are managers of NewSpace Center LLC, a New Port Richey company, which has submitted plans to build Interspace, a space-themed entertainment and research facility in Titusville on Florida's Space Coast.

The number of guests would be limited, like at Orlando's Discovery Cove. Both men use the words "high fidelity" a lot when describing the attraction.

"This is not going to be about moving more bodies through turnstiles," Palaia said. "It's much more immersive and interactive."

But only to a point. Guests would be allowed to go back to their cars or phone home and check on the kids. Food, such as steaks, not likely to be served on the real Mars, would probably be available on Mars Lite.

"We're not putting them in a prison cell," Palaia said with a chuckle.

NewSpace Center LLC could break ground as early as September and open in August 2012, the men said. The Titusville City Council recently voted to waive \$2,100 of costs associated with the project.

The city and county have already approved tax breaks for the project and TICO airport has agreed not to charge a leasing fee for the 75-acre site until construction officially begins, according to *Florida Today*.

Site plans call for multiple hotels, themed restaurants and a university branch campus.

Homnick and Palaia hope the park would be a first step toward actually sending manned flights to Mars someday by generating revenue toward that end.

Government money for space travel has dried up, but there's no reason the private sector couldn't begin programs, the men said.

In fact, Palaia, a 30-year-old graduate of MIT, hopes to someday visit Mars for real.

In July, he even spent a month with five other volunteers at Canada's Devon Island, just 800 miles from the North Pole. A meteor fell there 20-million years ago, creating a crater with conditions similar to the Red Planet.

He told his wife, an assistant librarian in Largo, that she'd have to let him go on the three-year journey as a condition of their marriage. (A one-way trip to Mars takes six months).

Would Palaia's wife be willing to visit Mars in Titusville?

"I think she'd go for that," he said.

[Last modified: Mar 03, 2010 09:57 PM]

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