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Like no place on Earth

Early edition: A New Port Richey company has joined the race to colonize and commercialize Mars, maybe as soon as 2025.

By KRIS HUNDLEY
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NEW PORT RICHEY — For both Mark Homnick and Joseph Palaia IV, the turning point came after reading The Case for Mars, a 1996 book by aerospace engineer Robert Zubrin.

Zubrin argued that creating a settlement on Mars is not only feasible, it is the kind of technological challenge that Western civilization needs. Palaia, weaned on Star Trek episodes, and Homnick, a fan of the mid 1960s TV series Fireball XL5, were hooked.

Today, Homnick is chief executive and Palaia is vice president of New Port Richey's 4Frontiers Corp., which seeks to colonize and commercialize the Red Planet.

The entrepreneurs foresee the day — perhaps as soon as 2025 — when they could use low-cost launch services now being developed to send a dozen settlers to Mars. Those pioneers would build communities and mine resources that could be used by explorers on the moon or shipped back to Earth.

Far-fetched? Maybe. Maybe not. NASA on Monday unveiled its own plans for a permanent base on the moon to be started around 2020.

"This is no science fiction. There are no technological breakthroughs required," said Palaia, who is in the process of relocating to the area from Boston. "There are just a lot of systems that need to be engineered."

At this point 4Frontiers, run from Homnick's home, is more about passion than profit. But they insist there are both long- and short-term business reasons for jumping into the space race.

"It's almost like another dot-com boom," said Palaia, referring to the growing number of business startups engaged in everything from commercial launch companies to space tourism. "The X-Prize (to encourage and reward human spaceflight) catalyzed a group of people who decided if they sit around and wait for NASA, it might not happen. And there are tremendous opportunities to generate capital."

Homnick, 49, who moved to Pasco County after taking early retirement from semiconductor giant Intel Corp., joined author Zubrin's Mars Society. About a year ago, he attended one of its meetings at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge.

Palaia, a 27-year-old doing his graduate work in nuclear engineering at MIT, was at the same meeting where techies of all ages were speculating on what a self-sustaining Mars settlement might look like.

"This is the type of thing they talk about at MIT," said Homnick, who often gets a different response from his neighbors in New Port Richey. "They live on the border there. You can have theoretical discussions about living on Mars without anyone batting an eye."

4Frontiers has developed a business plan and is seeking \$30-million in initial financing. The company is now self-funded. As evidence, Homnick, a mechanical engineer who built wafer fabrication plants for Intel for a decade, points to an empty dock next to his waterfront home.

"The company is my boat," he said. "I can get a boat anytime."

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Advisory team

The company's first step has been to assemble a team of 45 advisors, specialists in everything from mining to robotics to hydrogeology, to design a habitat for the Mars surface. Using the explorers Lewis and Clark as role models, the scientists believe that space-going experts, equipped with the right fuel and tools, could use the carbon, nitrogen and hydrogen on Mars to create a self-sustaining community.

"For tech folks who actually understand what would be involved in making this work, it is an almost irresistible challenge," Homnick said of the consultants, who receive a stipend for their work.

4Frontiers hopes to leverage the consultants' expertise and technologies that emerge from their research for licensing and consulting work. Palaia just completed such an assignment, applying research he has done for the Mars project to a semiconductor manufacturer's work in Massachusetts.

To make some money in the meantime, the company is considering a tourist draw by building a mockup of its proposed Mars installation in Florida or New Mexico.

Homnick defended the company's combination of high science and mass infotainment.

"We need public support to make this happen," he said. "As long as our replica is real science based, it could be our greatest asset."

Though the public might expect a government entity like NASA to spearhead a Mars settlement, 4Frontiers' founders believe entrepreneurs like themselves are likely to get there first.

"We have a good relationship with NASA and their research has made a lot of work possible," said Homnick, adding that a NASA representative is on his company's advisory board. "But NASA's focus is on exploration, not long-term habitation."

Though Homnick thinks he will be too old to make the journey to Mars, Palaia is so sure he'll go he made it a condition of his marriage. (His wife has no interest in space travel.) The trip to Mars takes six months; round-trip would take three years.

But Palaia expects early settlers will stay longer, like many early explorers to North America who crossed an ocean never to return.

"If you had the opportunity to be there in the beginning, when America was settled, what would you pay?" Palaia asked. "It's time for that to happen again."

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