

Despite crash, rocket backers still looking up

By Andy Lenderman
The New Mexican

The first Spaceport America rocket launch ended with a proverbial thud, but officials remain hopeful private space travel will provide a huge boost to New Mexico's economy.

The state, with approval of the Legislature, has set aside \$115 million to develop the spaceport. Most of that money has yet to be spent, and state government must meet several criteria before the money can be used.

Still, some wonder whether \$115 million is a good investment considering the many needs of New Mexico's poor, including children. "We think it's a bit of a strange use of resources," said Gerry Bradley, an economist with the advocacy group New Mexico Voices for Children. "Because the well-documented needs in public school construction are there. ... We know that they're huge."

Bradley also noted several other states

are building their own spaceports, and New Mexico's investment is not risk free. "We think it's a gamble," Bradley said. "It would be a sure thing if we're spending it on our educational infrastructure."

The state Economic Development Department's deputy secretary said New Mexico is uniquely positioned to take advantage of the emerging private space business. "This site in particular is probably the best site in the country for an inland spaceport," Deputy Secretary Kelly O'Donnell said.

The Sierra County location has the right elevation, good weather, low population density, protected airspace from the nearby White Sands Missile Range and scientific expertise from the state's national laboratories, she said.

New Mexico does face challenges regarding its economy, she said. For example, when compared to other states, per capita personal income and the percentage of children living in poverty are often

among the worst in the country.

But the new space industry could help solve that problem, she said. "This is an opportunity of the same magnitude," O'Donnell said.

The chairman of the Sierra County Commission described the spaceport as phenomenal. He's lived there since 1978. "Since 1978, there has been no economic development of any sort in Sierra County," chairman Russ Peterson said. "Nothing at all."

Tourism and agriculture are the leading industries aside from the spaceport, Sierra County Commissioner Jimmy Rainey said. "I think it has the potential to be the biggest economic development in Sierra County's history," Rainey said.

One state-sponsored study said the spaceport could generate \$460 million in new economic activity and 3,460 jobs by 2015.

That would include fully developed, private space tourism, visitor spending and the Rocket Racing League operations.