

# Virgin Galactic VP, at Las Cruces conference, says company close to Spaceport America move

Jason Gibbs, Las Cruces Sun-News

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LAS CRUCES - Without committing to a specific date, Virgin Galactic Vice President Mike Moses hinted at encouraging news about the company's long-awaited move to Spaceport America while speaking Thursday at the International Symposium for Personal and Commercial Spaceflight.

"I haven't yet moved to Las Cruces and I always still have to fly in for this conference rather than just driving down the road," Moses said. "Hopefully next year. Although I think I said that last year, I think I can do that next time."

Speaking to the roughly 250 ISPCS attendees at the New Mexico Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum, Moses detailed progress on testing of White Knight Two and SpaceShipTwo. White Knight Two is the vehicle that carries SpaceShipTwo, christened VSS Unity, to launch altitude before it engages its engines and powers to the upper atmosphere.

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The vehicles are in the middle of flight testing in Mojave, California, and are performing well, Moses said. Crews are testing Unity at subsonic speeds, evaluating the feathering system used on re-entry and examining performance on approach and landing.

"Unity has been performing very well, sometimes better than models predicted," Moses said. "Things are right on track where they need to be."

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Virgin Galactic Vice President Mike Moses

Next up will be powered flight testing. While Unity is being tested, two more vehicles are being built to increase the fleet once it's proven in powered flight. That, Moses said, is an indication of Virgin Galactic's commitment to have multiple vehicles ready when commercial manned flights begin at Spaceport America.

Crews are putting final touches on the propulsion system and "pretty soon" will be evaluating supersonic boost. Virgin founder Richard Branson, in Helsinki last week, told [Business Insider](#) "We are hopefully about three months before we are in space, maybe six months before I'm in space."

When questioned about that statement by ISPCS session moderator Ariane Cornell, Moses took a more conservative tone.

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“Richard always poses a challenge, he likes to push us pretty hard,” Moses said. “Sometimes I wish he wouldn’t talk so much. We hope to be in space by the end of this year. We’ll take our time with it. We’re going to fly when we are ready.”

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Virgin Galactic has sold roughly 700 tickets at \$250,000 for humans to take a ride to the edge of space and experience spaceflight first-hand. Designed as a four-day experience, passengers will spend the first day familiarizing themselves with the vehicle. The second day they will learn the onboard systems and the third day will be for relaxing prior to flight on the fourth day.

“The adventure, the thrill, the view, the weightlessness all are good reasons to go,” Moses said. “The more people do that, it will change the fabric of our civilization.”



Dan Hicks, CEO of Spaceport America, speaks during the second day of the International Symposium for Personal and Commercial Spaceflight, Thursday October 12, 2017 at the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum. (Photo: Josh Bachman/Sun-News)

Dan Hicks, CEO of Spaceport America, said the spaceport, in Sierra County, is ready to welcome Virgin Galactic’s increased presence as soon as they are ready. Virgin Galactic is the anchor tenant for the spaceport and has already moved some staff to Las Cruces in anticipation of ramping up activity there.

At a cost of nearly \$220 million, the taxpayer-financed Spaceport America opened in 2011. At the time, officials envisioned a new commercial space economy that would transform southern New Mexico. That economy has yet to come to fruition, but [officials are hopeful](#).

**More:** [New Mexico legislators question Spaceport America funding](#)

The spaceport continues to work with other private tenants as well as the Department of Defense and NASA on other projects. Hicks noted increasing competition from the other nine FAA-licensed spaceports around the nation and said nine more facilities were seeking licenses to operate. As the nation's first purpose-built spaceport, Spaceport America stands to tap into an increasing demand for low-earth-orbit projects and stands to be a primary location for transportation of both humans and cargo.

"The commercial space industry is growing so fast. It's an exciting time we live in," Hicks said. "The other states realize they want to be able to support this economic engine. Each of the spaceports ... have certain capabilities and unique attributes that allow them to support the industry. Going forward, we will certainly work together."

TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES - Virgin Galactic's carrier plane, the WhiteKnightTwo, sailed the skies of southern New Mexico on Wednesday, part of its first visit to Spaceport America since the summer of 2014. Diana Alba Soular

"We're leveraging too, on some unique capabilities and our partnership with the military at White Sands (Missile Range)," Hicks added. "The thing that excites me is where this industry is going and, already, the infrastructure we have around the country to support it."

Hicks said he is working with the three tenants, Virgin Galactic, UP Aerospace and Exos Aerospace, on flights that will provide three- to four-minute windows of microgravity for scientific and medical research. Gathering that data and being able to return it to Earth more quickly than the ISS will be a "game changer," he said.

He pointed to [recent tests on Boeing's Starliner](#) landing capsule, done in February with collaboration from WSMR, as part of the ongoing work at the spaceport. The Starliner is intended to be the crew capsule for NASA missions to the ISS. It's also an example of what Hicks hopes will be more work done for the Department of Defense and its contractors.

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"As we go forward as a nation, there are certain national defense security capabilities that will warrant, that will need an inland spaceport," Hicks said. "There are a lot of great capabilities on the coast. But sometimes there's certain security perspectives. We just don't want some activities happening, or returning, that we want to protect a little bit. Having an inland capability is important to our nation going forward."

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