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Dayton faces nationwide competition in its quest to win Space Command HQ



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In aiming for the stars, Dayton faces tough nationwide competition.

Communities across the nation have forwarded bids to serve as the new permanent home for the headquarters of U.S. Space Command . Different observers see different front-runners. And depending on whom you ask, the quest to host Space Command is either a solid chance for cities to raise their national profiles — or a political exercise.

John Boyd, principal of New Jersey-based site selection firm The Boyd Co. Inc., initially didn't see Dayton as a front-runner in the competition when the Dayton Daily News first interviewed him in May. At the time, he called Dayton "more of an outlier candidate."

Boyd has since revised that opinion.

“In recent weeks we’ve seen a number of things happen that have enhanced Dayton’s case and the way that Dayton is viewed by industry analysts as a legitimate contender for this historic project,” Boyd told the Dayton Daily News in July.

- John Boyd, principal, The Boyd Co. Inc.

In May, the Pentagon set criteria for what leaders want in a new Space Command home, inviting communities to make their best case. Immediately, leaders of the Dayton Development Coalition and other regional advocates spoke up for the Gem City, and in July came word from the Pentagon that, in fact, Dayton met Department of Defense criteria.

Next up: A decision, which isn’t expected until early next year.



The Pentagon’s criteria include: Communities should be within 25 miles of a military base, within the top 150 most populous metropolitan areas, and score at least 50 out of 100 on the AARP’s Livability Index.

Dayton, obviously, is near Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, and as of July 2019, the Dayton metropolitan area was ranked at 107 in terms of population. According to the AARP Index, the Dayton area scores a 53 on the Livability Index.

Dayton’s bid also has Ohio’s unanimous support.

“We saw this impressive display of cooperation among lawmakers on both sides of the aisle, like Gov. Mike DeWine,” Boyd said, referring to state leaders’ unanimous endorsement of Dayton as the new Space Command home.

Boyd also believes recent legislation designed to make Ohio more friendly to military families holds the state in good stead, with the state now recognizing professional licenses from other states and offering military families lower in-state college tuition.

“All of that sends a great message, not just to Space Command, but it also sends a great message to the aerospace industry, who is watching this process play out,” Boyd said.

“We’re watching a high level of professionalism out of Ohio, and how they’ve conducted this project so far,” he added.

The headquarters at stake — with its 1,400 or so jobs — is not that of U.S. Space Force, which is a separate military branch that will remain based at the Pentagon, but Space Command, a sometimes confusing distinction.

While the roles for each organization continue to be defined, it’s generally understood that Space Command will oversee space operations using personnel and assets managed by Space Force. Space Force is not meant to put combatants into space.

Both are separate from NASA, the civilian space agency.



Rocky Mountain front-runner?

Todd Harrison, director of the Aerospace Security Project for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, is skeptical of Dayton's chances.

Harrison notes that Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs, Colo. retains the command's "provisional" headquarters during the search process.

He sees that as important.

"The front runner is clearly Colorado, and I say that because that's where the work is already done," Harrison said.



To move Space Command HQ anywhere other than Peterson would involve substantial cost, Harrison said. "We're talking on the order of a billion dollars," he said.

A new headquarters would have to build an array of facilities and infrastructure to handle the command's duties, facilities that can handle plenty of classified activities, data lines, satellite communication equipment and more, he said.

"All of that stuff is already in the region around Peterson Air Force Base and Colorado Springs, because they already do the job there," Harrison said.

But well before May, the Air Force had already considered a command move, albeit with just a few early candidates.

The Air Force narrowed down its list of possible new command sites to five or six — "and then the decision was taken away from the Air Force," Harrison said. "The White House got interested in this as a political matter."

According to defense publication web site BreakingDefense, the early contenders on the Air Force list were Buckley, Cheyenne Mountain, Peterson and Schriever air force bases in Colorado; Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, and Redstone Arsenal in Alabama.

Wright-Patterson was not on that list.

Harrison contends that a military decision about the command headquarters "quickly became political," making necessary an invitation to communities across the country to throw their hats into the ring.

"All of these state and local governments caught on to this and realized, 'Hey, if they can convince the Trump administration to move it to their location, this would bring in lots of jobs and lots of money.'" Harrison said.

Dayton's secret weapon

Dayton advocates believe the case for Wright-Patterson is straightforward: It's already home to one of the nation's largest and most important Air Force bases, as well as the National Air and Space Intelligence Center, also known as NASIC, whose work is important both to the Air Force and Space Force.

The region is home to 30,000 military and civilian employees and a tight-knit community of contractors, all of whom work together to arguably create the future of the Air Force.

Other strengths include Dayton's lower cost of living, lower cost of travel, and proximity to the East Coast, closer to the Pentagon and Air Force decision-makers, advocates say.

"But really I think the strongest thing we bring is the workforce," said Elaine Bryant, executive vice president for defense and aerospace at the Dayton Development Coalition. "We have the

ability to get the technical, the leadership, the managerial workforce that is needed to run this operation.”

Nationwide competition

Matt Borron, executive director of the Association of Defense Communities, said interest in Space Command is nationwide.

A lot of communities are eyeing the headquarters, said Borron, whose Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit represents communities intent on protecting and growing their military installations, including Dayton.

“It’s a big deal,” he said. “It’s 1,400 people. It’s 1,400 pretty high-paying jobs. That’s a big deal for any community, especially the size of Dayton, or heck, even Colorado Springs.”

Like Harrison, Borron said Colorado Springs/Peterson AFB has an advantage.

“The Air Force has NORAD (the North American Aerospace Defense Command) there, they have Peterson, those kinds of installations that were really focused on the Air Force’s space mission,” Borron said.

Emphasizing that he is not advocating for any one location, he also said: “Colorado Springs has done a good job, too. They’ve been a great community in terms of stepping up and making sure that whatever DoD says is important, they’re looking to do that in their community.”

Frank DiBello, president and CEO of Space Florida Inc., said Florida’s Atlantic coast has a rich history tied to the nation’s space program. Already in Florida is a storied launch capability and a supply chain to match, with satellite and rocket manufacturers nearby, he said.

Florida also is home to three military combatant commands, including the U.S. Southern Command in Miami, the U.S. Special Operations Command at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, and U.S. Central Command, also at MacDill.



Credit: Jeff Spotts

Indeed, Florida has more than 20 military bases.

“As far as space goes, Florida has always been the pointy end of the spear,” DiBello said. “It’s the most active space port in the country, and it has a robust capability to support launch on demand, as well as satellite on demand.”

‘We have what Space Command is looking for’

Other communities are saying little about their chances, though.

“We are treating the bid for U.S. Space Command the same way we would handle an economic development project, which is to keep the process confidential until the client elects to share the information,” said Chip Cherry, president and CEO of the Huntsville/Madison County Chamber in Alabama.

Cherry declined further comment, as did a spokeswoman for the Colorado Springs Chamber of Commerce.

A representative of Space Command referred questions to the office of Secretary of the Air Force Barbara Barrett.

In the end, the community that wins the command might be the one that best tells its story, Borron said.

“Communities need to get a lot better at that,” he said. “I think Dayton has always been good at that.”

Dayton advocates should emphasize the way civilians and uniformed military have always worked together here, the strength of the defense sector around the base, even Wright-Patterson’s work against COVID-19, Borron said.

“I would say keep pressing,” is his advice to Dayton. “Find out what the DoD thinks is really important for this mission.”

“I have always thought from day one that we’re an underdog,” the local coalition’s Bryant said. “But we’re a contender. We have what Space Command is looking for.”