

Tampa Bay is vying to be home of the Space Force Command HQ, and its chances are better than you think



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By Veronica Brezina-Smith – Reporter, Tampa Bay Business Journal - Jul 10, 2020

Hillsborough County and the city of Tampa joined efforts for the chance to be home of Space Force command headquarters, and experts say the region has a fairly strong chance of being a top contender.

The area is home to MacDill Air Force Base and there are 100,000 veterans in the area, providing a pool of a skilled talent workforce.

In playing to strengths, Tampa Mayor Jane Castor and Hillsborough County Commission Chair Les Miller signed a letter to Assistant Secretary of the Air Force John Henderson positing itself as a prime location.

The joint effort between the city and county demonstrates camaraderie and may stand out — some interested municipalities didn't combine efforts.

In May, the Air Force requested that communities interested in hosting the headquarters of the newly created U.S. Space Force, a branch of the Air Force, to nominate themselves to their state's governor. Gov. Ron DeSantis had to endorse the bid by June 30, which he did for the local counties.

The city and county jointly worked together on the letter to include the benefit of working with MacDill. It also said a site may be selected outside of the city limits but within the county, said Steve Morey, senior vice president of the Tampa Bay Economic Development Council.

The Space Force's purpose is to organize, train and equip space forces in order to protect U.S. and allied interests in space. Its responsibilities include developing military space professionals, acquiring military space systems and maturing the military doctrine for space power. The new military branch will consolidate space-related operations missions from across the U.S. armed forces.

The minimum criteria required to be considered is that the region must have a population base that is within the top 150 largest Metropolitan Statistical Areas in the United States, a location that's within 25 miles of a military base, and a livability index score of 50 points out of 100 or higher as determined by the American Association of Retired Persons Public Policy Institute.

Not only is the Tampa Bay area home of the MacDill as well as U.S. Special Operations and Central Commands, there are also large defense contractors such as Honeywell International Inc. and branches for industry giants like Lockheed Martin and Boeing.

"There are other areas with universities, but we are in an urban setting, which I think is more attractive for recruiting a strong workforce," University of South Florida Dean of Engineering Bob Bishop said.

He is also the founder of the Institute of Applied Engineering, located at USF, and has been working with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration for years.

"We have Cyber Florida [a state-funded organization that positions Florida as a national leader in cybersecurity] , the intellectual fire power at USF, all of the state universities providing the talent pipeline, and our history in the Space Coast," he said.



Robert H. Bishop the new dean of the USF College of Engineering. John Nienhuis

Other communities that self-nominated include Pinellas County, Jacksonville, Pensacola, Miami-Dade County, Orange County, Seminole County, and Brevard County where the Space Coast is located.

Thus far, 26 states have submitted bids to host the U.S. Space Command headquarters.

“[The state] knew this opportunity was coming and wanted to compete for it,” Space Florida VP Government and External Relations Dale Ketcham said. Space Florida is Florida’s aerospace economic development organization.

“Last year, the governor sent a letter to Frank DiBello [Space Florida president and CEO] and in it he said the pursuit of the Space Force command HQ is among your highest priorities and to land it here,” Ketcham said.



Dale Ketcham of Space Florida Jim Carchidi

Since then, the group has been helping counties and cities in Florida compete for the opportunity.

Ketcham said Space Florida has met with executives in the industry and local leaders throughout Florida, including officials in Tampa twice, once virtually. The last meeting had 80 attendees who were in the advance manufacturing and cybersecurity space.

Tim Jones, founder of high-tech, Brandon-based company Cybrix Group and acting head of the Tampa Bay Defense Alliance, said the Hillsborough and Pinellas county EDCs have specific sites in mind, although he did not disclose where those sites are.

Next steps in landing the HQ

“The Air Force is not going to seek proposals, they don’t want people hiring consultants putting together proposals. The bidding communities [that are shortlisted] will be receiving questionnaires before the end of this month to those who self-nominated,” Ketcham said. “Now we wait.”

Candidates will be scored and top-scoring locations will receive a site visit. The Air Force plans to make a final selection in early 2021.

If the headquarters were to be established in Florida, the economic impact would be felt across county lines.

“This is very similar to the Super Bowl. The hotels in St. Pete, Clearwater would have rooms filled,” CareerSource Tampa Business Services Director Dan Schneckenburger said. “When you have eight areas in Florida wanting this, it says that we are interested in anything rolling out of this.”

“A big-picture theme here is, regardless where it would be in Florida, Tampa’s economy will benefit dramatically,” corporate site selection expert John Boyd said, echoing Schneckenburger’s comments.

Boyd represents several defense companies that have locations throughout Tampa Bay and has closely been monitoring the progress on Space Force’s search.

“When you look at the political and financial climate Florida is in, it’s able to flex its muscles,” Boyd said.

“Tampa is in the midst of waterfront developments, new millennial-friendly housing, mixed-use development coming to our market — this is an exciting time in the region.”