

Group Makes Longshot Bid to Mark '62 Orbit

By Jay Reeves

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MADISON, Ala. — Retired pilot Craig Russell has picked out the rocket he wants to launch into space, and he's selected two astronauts to ride it. He's got an advisory board that includes the engineer who sent John Glenn into orbit.

Now, if they can all just come up with more than \$60 million to blast a dream into reality.

In a plan that's part "The Right Stuff" and part "The Astronaut Farmer," a group headed by Russell wants to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Glenn's 1962 mission by launching a private spacecraft carrying two people and science experiments into orbit.

It's T-minus nearly four years for the flight, which Russell says can really, truly happen if just a fraction of U.S. citizens catch the spirit and send him a few bucks each.

"This is America's launch," Russell said.

The program has brought in some of the graybeards of the U.S. space program including T.J. O'Malley, launch director of Glenn's Friendship 7 flight. O'Malley pushed the button to launch the rocket that carried Glenn to fame as the first American to orbit Earth.

O'Malley, 92, hopes Russell can pull off a launch.

"I think he's trying to do a very noble effort," he said. "I hope the Lord spares me so I can be there."

Russell said he's spoken to Glenn, who returned to orbit as a 77-year-old on a 1998 space shuttle mission, and Glenn supports the plan. A spokesman for Glenn at Ohio State University's John Glenn School of Public Affairs did not respond to a request to interview the former senator.

Russell, 55, works in a tiny office filled with space photos and models just outside Huntsville, where NASA is busy designing the next U.S. moon rockets. The former cargo pilot is living out a lifelong passion: He applied to be an astronaut in 1983 but wasn't picked.



Originally, Russell's group — Americans in Orbit 50 Years — wanted to construct a replica of Glenn's Atlas rocket and Mercury capsule, outfit it with modern electronics and launch a single person into space in 2012. The price and logistics proved overwhelming, however.

As an alternative, the plan now is to purchase a flight aboard Falcon 9 rocket from Hawthorne, Calif.-based Space Explorations Technologies Corp., or SpaceX, a private aerospace company which NASA is considering using for cargo flights to restock the space station after the shuttle stops flying in 2010.

SpaceX has its own capsule design, but Russell wants to reconstruct a two-person Gemini capsule, which NASA flew in the mid-1960s before the Apollo program began, and launch it on a Falcon 9. A plastic Gemini model from his boyhood serves as his inspiration.

He's already picked out two astronauts, Dr. Howard Chipman, a pilot, and his fiance, Veronique Koken. Chipman has done some training for spaceflight in Russia, and he's opening his own astronaut training center near his home in Tampa Bay, Fla.

Chipman said he's dreamed of making a spaceflight like the one depicted in "The Astronaut Farmer," the film in which a NASA washout builds his own rocket in his barn and blasts himself into orbit. Money is the only roadblock to launching in 2012, he said.

"The technology has been out there since 1962," said Chipman, who is helping raise money for the project.

Private space flight, meanwhile, is on the rise. The Federal Aviation Administration said commercial space transportation was a \$139 billion industry in 2006 accounting for about 730,000 jobs.

For \$60 million, Russell's group hopes to build a capsule and purchase a Falcon 9 flight. The tab could approach \$100 million with a test flight included, but Russell hopes to defray up to \$30 million of the cost by including a commercial payload on the mission. He's hoping the end of space shuttle flights in 2010 helps his sales.

Russell says he has raised less than \$1 million. His organization is seeking grants, university partnerships and private investors to fill the gap.

One step is out of the way: The organization already has obtained some of NASA's old plans for a Gemini capsule like the one Russell hopes to build. They were stored in a federal archive in Texas.

A spokesman for rocket maker SpaceX, Roger Gilbertson, said the plan to commemorate Glenn's flight is feasible. Russell just has to come up with the money.

"I've seen his drawings, what he's proposing to do. It's certainly within the realm of how rockets have been built in the past," Gilbertson said from company headquarters near Los Angeles.