



Leading in the Space Economy:

A Strategic Playbook for Governors and Mayors

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The space economy is rapidly growing — last year, it was worth \$626.4 billion globally,¹ and projections estimate it will be worth \$1.8 trillion by 2035.² The United States produces approximately half of that value as of 2023.³ This includes everything from rocket launches to satellite broadband subscriptions to images of Earth used to monitor deforestation or inform military action.

Beyond GDP growth, jobs in this sector tend to have above-average salaries for workers, whether they have a high school diploma or an advanced degree.⁴ This has led to strong competition between states and localities to retain and grow the space industry's presence in their backyard.

This engagement from states and localities is good for the nation's space competitiveness. The benefits of intracountry competition extend beyond the borders of the United States — it's actually our biggest geopolitical competitor's secret weapon in their space program. Chinese provinces and municipalities compete to develop the strongest technologies, leading to massive investment beyond the central government.⁵ For example, the Shanghai municipal government recently announced a 300 million yuan (roughly \$4.4 million) package of investments for its local space industry — from subsidies to industrial park infrastructure to favorable loan terms. Beijing is a strong competitor for Shanghai, with both producing satellite broadband constellations that compete with American services like Starlink.⁶

The United States should not emulate China — there is a reason the U.S. is the global space leader — but as geopolitical competition heats up, the nation should glean insights about

what's working abroad and apply them to the American context while avoiding the pitfalls of foreign approaches, such as excessive debt and waste. In this case, it points to the increased role governors and mayors across the country can take to develop their space industry in a fiscally sustainable manner. State and local investment cannot replace federal space spending, but it is highly complementary.

There are strongholds across the country for this industry, which has a presence of some kind in just about every state. States and cities have used different playbooks to retain and attract this industry, but there are key tactics that pop up repeatedly. This includes:

- Financial support, either in the form of tax breaks, grant funding, or non-liquid forms of support like incubator space
- Access to and attention from state and local political leaders
- Proximity to federal facilities that purchase space goods and services
- Workforce, such as a strong educational climate or sector-specific workforce programs

This report examines the strategies of states and localities across the nation to inform states and cities thinking about how they can retain and grow their space industry.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Financial support for the space industry comes in a variety of forms, from tax breaks to grant funding to non-liquid sources of support. All of these cost money, but they have differing returns

on that investment and target different segments of the industry.

States and cities targeting more mature, established companies like Lockheed Martin or Northrop Grumman are more likely to employ tax incentives and, when geographically appropriate, invest in launch infrastructure, while states and cities looking to attract “NewSpace” or startup companies like Firefly Aerospace or Interlune are more likely to utilize grant funding and offer incubators or accelerator programs. That isn't to say one-size-fits-all, and many states and cities personalize their packages to the portion of industry they're targeting.

When it comes to financial incentives, it's important that states and cities avoid engaging in a race to the bottom and focus on fiscally sustainable investments. In the Chinese context, municipal and provincial investments have led to economic growth, but they've also led to waste, duplication, and excessive debt. American states and cities should take a more restrained approach that plays off the unique strengths of each area to reap the benefits of investment while minimizing these potential downsides.

Grant Funding

Grant funding is the holy grail according to interviews with a variety of space industry representatives and startup founders. This is particularly true for early-stage ventures as capital is hardest to come by as companies spin up, given the high failure rate of pre-seed startups.⁷ Unfortunately, it's also the least popular among states and cities.

The only state that offers these grants at a significant scale is Texas, which has distributed \$150 million so far to 24 projects.⁸ Most of

those 24 grants went to companies to aid in their business growth, though some also went to localities for the development of space infrastructure or workforce development. Arizona is laying the groundwork to initiate grants through its state space commission, but has not started quite yet.^{9,10}

Other states offer small grants for specific purposes, like Florida's International Aerospace Innovation Fund, focused on bolstering international partnerships, and Colorado's Advanced Industries Early-Stage Capital and Retention Grants.

Most states — and some cities — have the ability to use economic development dollars to help companies relocate or expand in the state, but programs that don't explicitly target the space industry can be harder to find and/or access.

Tax Incentives

Tax incentives are one of the most common forms of space-focused economic development. They are valuable, but more effective for established companies that aren't experiencing a cash squeeze, as monetary benefits usually aren't recognized until tax season. This kind of incentive would be most appealing for an established commercial company rather than an early-stage startup.

Almost every state and city with a major industry presence has a space-specific tax credit, from California's Space Flight Property Tax Exemption to Florida's space activities sales tax exemption to Colorado's Advanced Industry Investment Tax Credit (which targets space investment among other leading industries).

The primary exception was Texas, which makes sense given its robust grant program and broader set of tax incentives that are not space-specific. Most of these states and cities mix and match different financial incentives depending on what the company (or type of company) they're looking to attract would find most valuable, so a strong grant program could easily make up for fewer space-specific tax incentives.

Non-Liquid Financial Support

Non-liquid financial support primarily applies to infrastructure companies can use, whether that's at a spaceport or incubator space. These cost the state or city money — and allow companies to save cash — but generally don't involve an exchange of funds. This is a catch-all category with segments that appeal to different industry audiences.

Given the squeeze on launch capacity in the United States, for instance, offering dedicated launch infrastructure is often extremely appealing to companies in that sector. However, the kind of infrastructure matters. Most modern companies are looking for vertical launch sites, which can only be found on the coasts and outside of the contiguous United States today, though horizontal facilities provide some value too. Virginia and Alaska have seen millions of dollars generated in GDP and thousands of jobs from state investments in their vertical launch spaceports.^{11,12} While Texas hasn't published a similar economic analysis, the proof is in the pudding with the growth of companies at local spaceports, most of which are focused on horizontal launch capabilities.¹³ Utah is exploring following in these states' footsteps by establishing a spaceport that can serve as an anchor to build a sustainable aerospace ecosystem.¹⁴

Spaceports aren't the only kind of infrastructure that companies find attractive — classified workspaces, otherwise known as “SCIFs,” are also an option. As the Department of Defense steps up its investment in the space domain and NASA's budget has stagnated, interest in classified work among the space industry has increased. However, these facilities are expensive and usually take a while to build. That makes investment in one unappealing to early-stage startups, particularly those that need access to prepare a grant proposal, but aren't sure if they'll need a SCIF long-term. New Mexico and Texas appear to be the only states that have honed in on this need. NewSpace Nexus, an independent non-profit supported by state, federal, and industry resources, is developing a “NewSpace Center” that will include SCIF space. That center is expected to create 1,000 jobs.¹⁵ In Texas, the state's space commission is funding an El Paso Space Innovation Hub that includes SCIF space.¹⁶

Finally, incubators and accelerator programs appeal to earlier-stage companies, sometimes even before they're incorporated. These programs mentor founders, teaching them how to raise funds, helping them build the network they need, and often provide resources like work space, specialized equipment, and testing facilities. These are quite common in states targeting growth of the space sector. For example, Colorado hosts their eSpace incubator at the University of Colorado at Boulder to help strengthen the pipeline between its world-class space educational institutions and the space industry. New Mexico's NewSpace Nexus has an incubator program called the NewSpace Ignitor Program, which has secured millions of dollars for participating companies.¹⁷ Partnerships with funders — private or government — and

educational institutions appear to make state incubators and accelerators far more successful than purely state-run programs.

POLITICAL ACCESS AND ATTENTION

State and local politicians play a key role in attracting and retaining the space industry as they drive budgets, targeted programs, creative financing vehicles, and regulatory posture.

The most common and visible form of political attention to the space industry is a space commission or alternative quasi-independent entity directed by state or local leaders. The Texas Space Commission, Space Florida, Long Beach Space Beach Council, Kentucky Space Futures Initiative, and the Maryland Aerospace and Technology Commission are all classic examples. These entities focus on developing the space industry, coordinating everything a state or locality offers the sector while thinking strategically about how to retain and grow it.

As this concept catches on, states and localities are starting to come together to share notes. Just this year, the Commercial Space Federation established a State and Local Council to better align state and local efforts with national capacity needs.¹⁸

Some states have also provided specific regulatory flexibilities to the space industry, making their state a more attractive place to operate. California's Spaceflight Liability and Immunity Act, which gives companies flying humans to space additional protection against lawsuits or financial penalties if they follow certain conditions, is a prime example.¹⁹ California is home to a robust crewed rocket launch industry, so it's a smart move to offer that sector additional protections to keep those

companies growing in the state. Virginia, Texas, Colorado, New Mexico, and others have similar legislation — notably, all of these are states with major space industries.²⁰

Locally, some cities have taken a look at their zoning laws to ensure space uses of attractive plots are allowable. For example, in Long Beach, CA, the latest update to the zoning of a neighborhood near the airport ensured that aerospace would be welcome and the city actively recruited space companies to use the land.²¹ This has paid off with companies from Relativity Space, Vast, and Rocket Lab now manufacturing in that neighborhood, creating high-paying jobs for the community.²²

It's hard to say whether political access and attention are the chicken or the egg. States and cities that have vibrant space sectors tend to have attentive governors, mayors, and state legislators — and vice versa. Ideally, cities, states, and federal agencies band together towards common goals in an area to maximize success.

FEDERAL FACILITIES

State and local investment is an important and underused tool for growing the space industry, but it pales in comparison to federal space spending. Overall state spending is in the hundreds of millions while federal spending is in the tens of billions.²³ Accordingly, state and local spending should be thought of as a complement to, not a substitute for, robust federal space investment. The clearest example of that synergy is the fact that the presence of federal buyers in a state — be they civil or national security — is a strong pull for industry.

Most major space hubs have proximity to federal facilities, and some have multiple. Take

Orlando, which has NASA's Kennedy Space Center, the Patrick Space Force Base, and the Cape Canaveral Space Force Station. Or Denver, located in the state home to half of all Space Force bases as well as Space Command, though the latter is slated to be removed from the state.

NASA and the U.S. Space Force are the most common federal facilities that help support the local space industry, but they're far from the only agencies that matter. In New Mexico, for instance, Sandia National Lab and the Army's White Sands Missile Range are engaged with local and national industry.

This is a big reason why state political leaders and their federal representatives fight hard over where federal agencies sit. Senator Patty Murray of Washington, for instance, has worked hard for years to try to secure a NASA or alternative space-related facility in the state she represents as one of the few major space states without a major space facility.²⁴

WORKFORCE

Space workforce challenges are felt industry-wide. According to Sat News, "95% of space organizations experience skills-related issues, with three-quarters struggling to recruit staff with necessary skills."²⁵ Suffice to say, states and localities that work to ensure companies are able to find qualified employees are highly attractive.

There is not one specific skillset sought after in space — it's an industry that requires IT, legal, engineering, design, hardware, and other competencies. Given that most companies do business with the Department of Defense or use export-controlled technologies in some capacity, these employees usually have to be U.S. citizens or permanent residents.

This is not a trivial restriction. Temporary visa holders earned between 25% and 40% of all science and engineering master's degrees between 2012 and 2021.²⁶ That represents a significant portion of the STEM workforce that's functionally off-limits to the space industry.

There are a number of different ways to get at this challenge — which reflects the broad range of educational backgrounds needed within the industry. Most people think of rocket scientists when they think of the space industry, which tends to cluster around top-tier aerospace engineering graduate or doctoral programs. However, just as important are welders or technicians who often have some vocational training from a community college or similar institution.

The most successful states weave together a space workforce strategy that starts in K-12 and branches off into a number of different pathways from credentials for machinists to reskilling programs that translate skills from other industries to the space industry to advanced degree programs. Strong partnerships with industry in the development of these pipelines and curricula are also a predictor of success, as potential employees who have been trained in name only or in archaic techniques aren't particularly helpful.

K-12 Investments

Before students get to any kind of credential relevant to the space industry, they typically need a high school diploma or equivalent. States like Oklahoma, Washington, and Florida are investing at this early stage to get students excited about working in the space industry.

In Oklahoma, the Space Industry Development

Authority gives out grants to educational institutions — mostly, though not solely, focused on K-12 — to provide space-related programming. This funds programs from model rocketry clubs to maker spaces to curriculum development and teacher training.

In Florida, Space Florida puts on a Space Program Academy focused on space career and technical education (CTE) in high schools across the state. They've worked with districts to implement the new academies that offer space industry relevant credentialing programs to students so they are desirable employees by the time they graduate.²⁷

In Washington, select public schools offer a two-year advanced manufacturing program with an aerospace focus. This program was designed in a partnership with Boeing and graduates thousands of students with career-ready manufacturing skills every year.²⁸

State programs like these fight misconceptions that the space industry requires advanced degrees and extensive math and science achievements. They also start developing the space workforce pipeline at a young age, which is significant given that students are more likely to pursue STEM majors later on if they're exposed during their K-12 educational career.²⁹

Community College, Credential, Training, and Apprenticeship Programs

Most jobs in the space industry require training beyond high school, whether it's an apprenticeship, two-year degree, or vocational credential.³⁰ These types of programs are usually easiest to implement quickly as standards are less rigid for these programs than they are for K-12 or four-year and beyond curricula.

Outcomes therefore vary too - the most successful states partner with industry to ensure these programs fill the skills gaps companies are concerned about to optimize student and industry outcomes.

Washington State truly shines in the educational realm. Beyond its K-12 programming, it also supports community college programs, apprenticeships, and other innovative vocational programs. For example, in partnership with industry, they back the AJAC, which runs youth and adult apprenticeship programs for hundreds of Washingtonians per year.³¹ Edmonds Community College hosts the Washington Aerospace Training & Research Center, which puts on rapid training programs focused on getting individuals ready to work in weeks, not years, with input from local industry partners to ensure their curriculum meets industry needs.³²

Colorado community colleges similarly partner with local employers to design their space programs. For example, the Colorado Space Institute at Arapahoe Community College partners with USSPACECOM and Red Rocks Community College works with Northrop Grumman.³³ It's clear that industry values this partnership as 14 companies spend their valuable time shaping curriculum for these programs, recognizing they need the talent being produced.³⁴ The partnership with local military is noteworthy as the Space Force alone is planning to double in size in the next four years.³⁵ That means there will be robust demand for space operators who can help with military planning and exercises, among other defense needs.

New Mexico and California layer on incentives for employers to train folks on the job, which can be particularly impactful for reskilling workers

who are already a number of years into their career.^{36,37} In California, this can be performed in the workplace for existing employees or by an outside organization looking to fill the needs of a given sector.³⁸ As technology shifts, this ensures that there are pathways for upskilling the local workforce. Given only 1.6% of job seekers formally relocate for new positions these days, that's valuable for workers as well as local employers.³⁹

The right mix of credentialing, training, and apprenticeship programs will vary depending on local employer demand, but ensuring there are pathways for skilled technical workers is a key way to ensure the space industry is either retained or grown in any given state.

University Programs

As important as the skilled technical workforce is, the space industry requires rocket scientists, engineers, and other roles that demand four-year or advanced degrees too. Some of the most prestigious programs — like those at Johns Hopkins University, Embry-Riddle, and the University of Washington — are near major employers in the industry, creating a strong academia-industry synergy.

Beyond proximity, states have also pushed for universities to partner with local industry on hands-on projects. Florida and Washington State are leaders in this.

The University of Florida stood up the Astraeus Space Institute, which connects faculty with federal and industry research opportunities, supports interdisciplinary seed projects, and provides opportunities for students to participate in research, as well as learn from industry leaders. This benefits the space

workforce pipeline by producing better prepared graduates, but it also provides research perks to local industry. Rather than investing in the infrastructure and expertise needed for specialized R&D, they can turn to the institute to get connected with faculty who can make the process easier on a reimbursable basis, as faculty may already have both the platforms and background needed.⁴⁰

Washington State follows a similar model, but takes it a step further. In addition to making experts available to local industry, the state's Joint Center for Aerospace Technology Innovation (JCATI) pays for students to work on critical problems in the "valley of death" — in other words, technology issues that are beyond basic research, but aren't yet commercializable.⁴¹ This gives students direct access to the problems industry cares about and provides them with hands-on experience solving technical problems, a win-win that boosts graduation rates.⁴²

CONCLUSION

The space race between states and cities can directly support the strength and competitiveness of the American space industry while boosting state and local economies — provided leaders avoid the pitfalls of China's approach so it becomes a race to the top rather than to the bottom. As the space industry rapidly grows, there's a clear playbook governors and mayors across the country should follow to attract and retain this important industry. The states and cities that are strongest combine fiscally responsible financial incentives, focus on the space workforce, political access and attention, and federal space facilities in one attractive region. Governors and mayors across the country would be wise to assess whether their existing space economic development strategy sets their state and the nation up for success.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Guenther is the Head of Space Policy at the Progressive Policy Institute. In this role, Mary focuses on evaluating and developing policy solutions that address how the United States government's relationship with space actors should evolve and how to best harness the benefits of space for people here on Earth.

Prior to joining PPI, Mary served as the Vice President of Space Policy at the Commercial Space Federation (CSF). In that role, Mary drove consensus on space policy issues amongst roughly 90 member companies representing various facets of the commercial space economy and engaged with lawmakers, executive agencies, and the public to get those policy solutions implemented. Prior to CSF, Mary served as a Professional Staff Member at the United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation focusing on space, science, emerging technology, cybersecurity, and manufacturing policy. In that role, she worked with colleagues to author and pass through the Senate the CHIPS and Science Act as well as a variety of smaller pieces of legislation.

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