

Jupiter-Size Potholes In The Planetary Society's Space Exploration Roadmap

Contributed by Jeff Krukin
Thursday, 13 November 2008

Quoting from The Planetary Society's press release: "The Planetary Society today outlined a vigorous new approach to space exploration for the consideration of the new U.S. Administration and Congress." Right. It's so vigorous that it almost completely ignores the fundamental source of vigor that will be necessary if the Roadmap is to be achieved. Not to mention two other significant flaws.

While the Roadmap makes some good points about interplanetary flight, the need for international commitment and cooperation, and for letting capability drive the timeframe, it is still too mired in the ClassicSpace paradigm of national space programs. I simply do not see enough evidence to believe that any nation's government space program, or collective multi-national programs, can maintain the consistent political and funding support required to achieve the Roadmap's goals. The best solution is to use a wise combination of public-private efforts that take advantage of the competitive nature of the emerging NewSpace industry. Unfortunately, there is barely a breath about NewSpace in the Roadmap, and certainly not to any degree that reflects an understanding that NewSpace must be the fundamental underpinning rather than a mere supporting player.

The Planetary Society's solution for insufficient funding leads to another significant flaw. Again, quoting from the press release, the plan calls for "deferring humans landing on the Moon until the costs of the interplanetary transportation system and shuttle replacement are largely paid." What kind of vision is this? It makes no sense to bypass what will become humanity's first celestial economic subsidiary.

I can only assume that the proposed deferring of human lunar landings is a direct outcome of The Planetary Society's inability or unwillingness to move beyond the ClassicSpace focus on exploration. And therein lies the third flaw in the Roadmap; the complete exclusion of the word "settlement," which also occurred in the very useful June 2004 "Report of the President's Commission on Implementation of United States Space Exploration Policy" (aka, The Aldridge Report). Note that "Exploration" is in the title of both documents.

Whether it's President Bush's Vision for Space Exploration or The Planetary Society's Roadmap, neither offers the economic sustainability and New World excitement that settlement would provide, and that only the private sector can develop.