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## Hope in the heavens, and in Cape Breton

By Jim Meek

IF THERE can be new plan-ets in the heavens, then space ships can be launched from Cape Breton Island.

I offer this whimsical bit of optimism to counter the critics who are already muttering that PlanetSpace's Cape Breton Odyssey is a pipedream of pit-mine proportions.

For my part, I call it fitting that PlanetSpace is talking about going into orbit during the same week that the world's astronomers are weighing a proposal to add three new planets (Ceres, Charon and Xena) to the solar system.

The International Astronomical Union held its planet-pondering parley in Prague, the city where the great Johannes Kepler figured out – back in the 17th century – how planets move in the heavens.

Pre-Kepler, pre-Copernicus, the Earth was seen to be at the centre of the universe, encircled by the sun. And man was seen to be at the centre of it all – thanks to a sometimes benign God.

Kepler was treated as a heretic by the Catholic Church for offering mathematical proof that the planets orbit around the sun. And it was Kepler's example – among others – that inspired George Bernard Shaw's thought that "all great truths begin as blasphemies."

Today, in the modern capital of the universe known as Halifax, it is blasphemous to suggest that anything resembling Cape Canaveral could ever succeed on Cape Breton Island.

The Island, in case you missed the big story, is the place where no one but fiddlers excel and nothing but wildflowers thrive.



Aspiring astronaut Wayne "Terry" Wong, centre, stands with Geoff Sheerin, left, and Dr. Chirinjeev Kathuria in London, Ont., in May 2005. Sheerin and Kathuria have announced that their company, PlanetSpace, will build a Cape Breton facility that could one day launch astronauts, cargo and even tourists into space. (CP File)

Certainly, no one who occupies a high seat in the secular church of Halifax is going to credit the notion that something as forward-looking as space travel could take off near the rough precincts of the old steel town of Sydney.

But that's exactly what PlanetSpace is proposing – with some enthusiasm. And it would like to blast off within the next few years.

The company's founding partners are Dr. Chirinjeev Kathuria of Chicago, and Geoff Sheerin of beautiful London, Ont. (Well, at least my hometown is pleasant enough when the yellow smog of summer doesn't get trapped in an atmospheric inversion.)

Sheerin and Kathuria may not be billionaires, but they're entrepreneurs and visionaries. Kathuria was among the founders of the first company to send a tourist into space, and Sheerin is working on a made-in-Canada rocket for space tourism.

Their business case for the Cape Breton project was solid enough to attract some early, conditional support from Nova Scotia Business Inc. – a government agency which boasts a fair-to-good track record for bringing jobs to this benighted and blessed province.

But while this proposal is still in embryo, critics are already emerging from the universities – where they presumably toil in a state of tenured splendour.

One wags a finger and suggests that no public money be used to further this project. Another frets that PlanetSpace may not make it onto NASA's preferred list of suppliers.

A CBC Radio interviewer, meanwhile, asks the Planet-Space partners the ultimate homer question: "Will you move here?" She also wonders about jobs for the locals.

These are solid queries, I suppose. And the critics may prove to be prophetic, even though no big developments ever seem to go forward these days – in any nation on Earth – without some support from government.

Either way, the underlying attitude of the critics is not the stuff of which dreams or Silicon Valleys are made.

And their script could have been written by Lewis Carroll of Alice in Wonderland fame. That is, the jury has reached its decision before the evidence is in. ("Off with their heads.")

As for Sheerin and Kathuria, all I am saying is let's give these guys a chance.

Their proposal hit the newspapers through a leak to a reporter, months before they were ready to take the proposal public. (Kudos to The Toronto Star for breaking this story.)

But I figure we should treat the PlanetSpace principals with some reasonable respect in the months leading up to an official press conference – which they plan to hold before the end of 2006.

That means treating the story as neither the beginning of the world, nor its end.

If nothing else, this is a fun yarn for the dog days of summer. And what's an August for, if we can't look to the heavens from Cape Breton Island, and think big thoughts?

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