

**BLAST OFF:** Michoud Assembly Facility in New Orleans will manufacture major parts of the Orion crew capsule.

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# THE FINAL FRONTIER

BY PENNY BROWN

Space is a hot commodity along the corridor.

**A LAKE CHARLES NATIVE** commands the space shuttle Endeavor on a mission to the International Space Station. An LSU/Southern University physics professor partners with scientists from 17 countries to study high-energy cosmic rays and their connection to violent black holes. NASA taps Michoud Assembly Facility to manufacture major parts for its next big galactic adventure.

The 10/12 corridor may not be the center of the universe, but it certainly has emerged as a center for exploration of the universe.

That's the main reason the I-12 Alliance has pegged aerospace manufacturing as one top targets for economic development in the region. The five parishes (St. Tammany, Tangipahoa, Livingston, St. Helena and Washington) are touting the NASA sites, as well as the UNO Advanced Technology Research Park, Louisiana Technology Transfer Center and existing clusters of remote sensing and geospatial technology firms and other relevant assets in hopes of wooing new business.

"There's terrific opportunity in this area," says Howard Daigle, a Covington lawyer who serves as GNO Inc.'s sector chairman of advanced aerospace & defense manufacturing. "It's real and right upon us."

The east end of the corridor has strong ties to Michoud in New Orleans and Stennis Space Center just over the border in Mississippi, both of which are expected to play key roles in future space-exploration projects. Livingston Parish is home to the National Science Foundation's Laser Interferometer Gravitational Wave Observatory, which is on the verge of upgrading to a more advanced system. The corridor boasts dozens of firms specializing in the space industry, and universities from Slidell to Lake Charles are engaged in federally funded research on the subject.

"We have a very vibrant aerospace industry along the corridor," says Charles D'Agostino, executive director of the Louisiana Business & Technology Center in Baton Rouge. "Particularly if you look at the whole picture, from Chenault in Lake Charles, which is a

phenomenal facility with one of the longest non-commercial runways. Then there are all the things happening on the Northshore, with Michoud and Stennis. Louisiana also gets its share of supplying those entities."

**THE CORRIDOR BEGAN** its venture into space in 1961, when NASA selected the Stennis and Michoud sites within a month of one another. Two years later, Michoud finished the first Chrysler-built Saturn. In 1966, Stennis began its test firing of rockets for the Apollo space program.

Both facilities are expected to be key players in the NASA's Constellation Program, which calls for manned vehicles to explore the moon, Mars and beyond. That's good news for the corridor, since more than half of Michoud's and a quarter of Stennis' workforce lives on the Northshore.

St. Tammany Economic Development Foundation Executive Director Brenda Reine-Bertus says the region is also home to a number of tech companies that have spun



**COSMIC FORCES:** More than half of Michoud's workforce lives on the Northshore.

off from Stennis—at least six of them in the past five years. One of them, Neptune Sciences (now Planning Systems Incorporated)—an oceanography and meteorology technology company—has won the prestigious national Tibbetts Award for its work.

In Livingston Parish, LIGO is delving into the fundamental nature of gravity by measuring ripples in the fabric of space and time produced by violent events in the distant universe, such as the collision of black holes or shockwaves from supernova explosions. The facility, and its sister site in Washington, together are largest single enterprise the National Science Foundation has ever backed (\$300 million to build; \$30 million in annual operating expenses). Some 550 scientists at 40 institutions worldwide are collaborating on the research.

LIGO Observatory Chief Joseph Giaime says in two years, the facility will upgrade to new detectors, which will make the volume of space scientists can observe 1,000 times bigger. The bigger, better LIGO will start ripple watching in 2014.

Universities along the corridor take part in the Louisiana Space Consortium, an entity with an interest in furthering space research in the state. In addition to pursuing research funding, the consortium also tries to recruit high school and college students to work in the industry through internships

and scholarships.

Just what kind of space-related research is being done along the corridor? LSU physics and astronomy professor Michael Cherry and Southern University's J. Gregory Stacy are working on the Gamma Ray Large Area Space Telescope Satellite Mission, which will study black holes, neutron stars and hot gas moving at the speed of light, among other energy phenomena. GLAST is set for launch May 12.

Jim Matthews, another professor of physics and astronomy at LSU and Southern, partnered with 17 countries to help the Auger Observatory in Argentina take a historic step toward understanding high-energy cosmic rays and their connection to violent black holes, linking the origins of these mysterious particles to nearby galaxies that have active nuclei in their centers.

The corridor's fascination with space got the spotlight this spring when Capt. Dominic Gorie, a Lake Charles native, piloted the space shuttle Endeavor on a mission to the International Space Station.

Louisiana Space Consortium Director John Wefel says the opportunity to attract more cosmic industry is ripe. "I think the space program is going to be quite robust," he says. "We just need to keep our eyes open and our ears peeled for the right prospects." **12**