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Could new Space Force cyber warfare unit land in San Antonio? Some already working to get it here

The newest branch of the military confirmed plans to create a headquarters for cybersecurity. Could it be in Cyber City USA?

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Brandon Lingle – May 22, 2024



A United States Space Force graduate runs with her detachment flag during a graduation ceremony this summer. A bipartisan group of lawmakers has called on DOD to restore funding for service members' housing stipends. Image: Kin Man Hui, San Antonio Express-News / Staff photographer

The U.S. Space Force is planning to create its own cyber warfare headquarters, it confirmed this week, and some San Antonio leaders are vying to land the unit here.

San Antonio — already known as Military City USA and Cyber City USA — may seem a natural fit for the new organization but the military's basing process is slow and complicated by special interests and political motives.

The city learned those lessons the hard way when it failed to lure space command two years ago. But at least some say they're ready to take another shot.

With about 9,000 military members and 5,000 civilians — about three times fewer people than the Coast Guard — the Space Force is the nation's newest and smallest military service. Established in late 2019 as part of the Department of the Air Force, it's responsible for securing the vastness of space. As it

grows, it's launching units tied to the nation's warfighting commands as other services have.

Among those is a cyber warfighting component, said Air Force Maj. Vicky Porto, a Space Force spokesperson.

"The Space Force intends to stand up service components to all the combatant commands, including CYBERCOM," she said. "Initial mission analysis is current underway for a Space Force Service Component to CYBERCOM, but the date for that standup has yet to be determined."

OTHER CONNECTIONS

Because the 16th Air Force, the branch's lead cyber unit that's also known as Air Forces Cyber, is already at JBSA-Lackland, some see the city as a natural home for the future Space Force cyber organization, too.

Among those is Jim Perschbach, President and CEO of Port San Antonio. He and other political and economic development leaders already are courting the Air Force and lawmakers to build a new campus for the 16th on Port San Antonio.

According to him, landing Space Force Cyber on Port San Antonio would add to the mix of national security, cyber, aerospace, robotics, space, entrepreneurial and academic entities already on the southwest side campus.



Jim Perschbach, Chief Executive of Port San Antonio, gives a State of the Port address at Boeing Center at Tech Port on Wednesday, June 14, 2023. The Port is the largest tech employer in San Antonio — and it's growing. The Port is working with new clients that will be on location. It's also pursuing a futuristic vertiport project on campus. Image: Kin Man Hui/Staff Photographer.

The nature of the cyber work requires collaboration across services, he said, so some of the facilities could host joint as well as individual operations.

"The proximity both to the other service components as well as to the academic, research, commercial and entrepreneurial ecosystem would add value to everybody," he said Tuesday. "So our view is we are building this for critical infrastructure protection writ large, with the military cyber obviously being a key component."

Port officials are having regular conversations with the Air Force and Space Force, he said, and the military has been "very open to innovative ideas" that provide efficiencies and help the U.S. compete against adversaries like China and Russia.

"They're very interested in conversations that advance the national security interest," he said.

While he thinks Space Force Cyber could also land at the Port, he's not saying it would necessarily be collocated with the future Air Forces Cyber. If not, there could be some overlap.

TOUGH LESSON

Three years ago, San Antonio learned it fell short its bid to bring the U.S. Space Command.

It's one of 11 combatant commands responsible for operations and warfighting around the globe, and San Antonio made a full-court press to bring the unit here.

Despite making it as far as being one of six finalists from a list of 50 cities, the Air Force ultimately selected Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Ala. The Biden administration overruled the Trump-era decision, however, and the headquarters has remained at its current location in Colorado Springs, Colo.



A conceptual rendering of a 16th Air force campus being proposed at Port San Antonio. Image: Port San Antonio.

The snub stung local officials, and, according to Perschbach, they've learned some lessons from the experience. Those included staying "really, really focused on the goal, and as much as possible, try to avoid falling into the political and bureaucratic morass that can come in," he said.

Years of effort to bring Space Command to San Antonio ultimately lost focus, he said.

This time the city is focused on its "value proposition...not just in terms of dollars and cents and timeline, but the larger value proposition of how the talent and technology integration allows the national defense to really be focused on national security."

While any formal proposals to attract Space Force Cyber aren't as developed as those for Air Forces Cyber, Perschbach sees the possibility as an opportunity for the port and community.

The regional economic development hub, Greater:SATX, has also offered its support of trying to attract another military unit.

"Port San Antonio is one of our greatest assets as the growing on-campus ecosystem seamlessly connects the military with commercial and education partners," said Jenna Saucedo-Herrera, Greater:SATX's president, in a statement Tuesday. "We are supportive of the work Jim and his team at Port San Antonio are doing to position the region as a national leader in the cybersecurity and defense sectors."