

Rocket Racing League debuts X-Racer, virtual racetrack

BY KEVIN ROBINSON-AVILA | NMBW STAFF

Space enthusiasts got their first real glimpse of what futuristic rocket racing has to offer during the **X Prize Cup** in Las Cruces Oct. 20-21.

The **Rocket Racing League** (RRL) debuted its virtual race-track-in-the-sky technology during the two-day event, and it unveiled its first Mark I Rocket Racer, dubbed the Thunderhawk.

"Spectators on the ground actually watched as a **Lear** jet flew through virtual tunnels in the sky," says RRL spokesperson Sandy Davenport.

The jet was mounted with newly developed software created by the RRL for rockets that will race at the X Prize Cup next year. The software projects a virtual tun-

nel, or race track in the sky that pilots must fly through. The image is simultaneously projected onto huge outdoor screens that allow spectators to actually see, real-time, what pilots are seeing from the cockpit.

"People were amazed," Davenport says. "It's not just cartoons or graphics projected on a screen. You actually see the planes flying through super-imposed tunnels."

The RRL also unveiled its first rocket racer — a 19-foot-long aircraft that will zoom at 300 miles per hour during **NASCAR**-style racing events. The races, which will take place for the first time in 2007, eventually will be held annually at the New Mexico spaceport. The League will build its 50,000-square-foot headquarters next year near the Las Cruces municipal airport. The facility will act as the anchor tenant

for a new aerospace park that will house a cluster of space-related businesses.

The Las Cruces City Council approved the sale of 171.35 acres to the RRL on Oct. 16 for the park. The League, which will pay \$2.33 million for the land, has an option on another 140 acres, says John Hummer, managing director of **RRL Land Development LLC**, which was created to oversee and manage land development activities for the Rocket Racing League.

"We'll start master planning now with the goal of breaking ground on the League headquarters by November 2007," Hummer says. "We'll offer three- to five-acre pad sites for industries that support the League."

League executives believe rocket racing will have a similar economic impact on

New Mexico as **NASCAR Valley** has on North Carolina, where **NASCAR** is headquartered. In 2003, that was estimated at over \$5 billion, with more than 24,000 high-wage jobs, says RRL Chief Operating Officer Tim Gormley.

"Las Cruces will become Rocket City — home of the Rocket Racing League," Gormley says.

RRL co-founder Peter Diamandis says the League will invest about \$50 million over the next 12 to 18 months, much of that in Las Cruces.

"We'll be testing our rocket racers and building infrastructure and facilities," Diamandis says. "This is a huge opportunity for southern New Mexico."

krobinson-avila@bizjournals.com | 348-8302