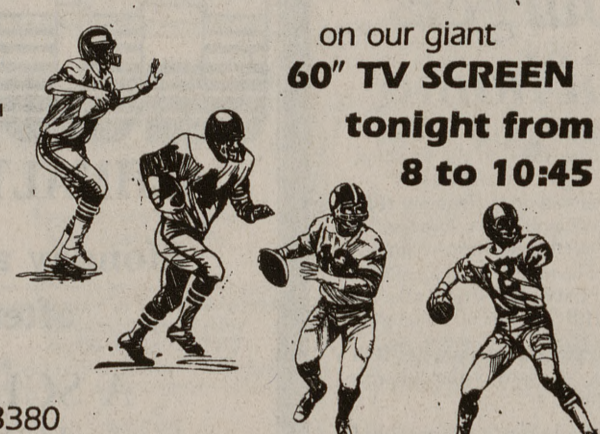


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## State

# Service station in space next?

United Press International  
**HOUSTON** — Interest is growing among NASA officials to develop a permanent space base later in this decade to serve as an orbiting service station for the expanding

space business they feel sure is coming.

The idea is to start off with an assembly put together from cylindrical modules hauled into orbit on

five flights of the new space shuttle rocket plane.

Engineers then would add other components as necessary, probably starting off with a construction facility from which space workers would be able to build large structures such as an Earth-serving communications relay platform.

The proposed "space operations center," to house eight people at first, would be a far cry from the old Skylab space station in which three Americans lived and worked for up to 84 days. Skylab was an orbiting

financial commitment from the White House and Congress.

"I think there's a general consensus within NASA now that probably the next big thing ought to do," Covington said. But although Frosch agrees something like the space operations center eventually will come a necessity, he says a number of years of actual operations of the shuttle are needed before a firm plan can be drawn up for the space base.

"It's hard to sell anybody a billion dollar space station when you're being speculative about what it's good for," Frosch said in an interview in Washington. He said the space shuttle flight test is more than two years behind schedule, and is now scheduled for next March.

"It's been hard for me to be convinced that I could go on sale on such a thing on a realistic speculative basis when the thing that would have to be done was, 'Well, you guys get the shuttle flying and then we'll talk about building things on it,'" Frosch said.

Adding to the interest for an American space station is the Soviet Union's steady progress toward a permanent station in orbit.

"It's operations-oriented rather than just putting people up there for a long time to do some experiments," said Clarke Covington, head of systems design at the Johnson Space Center. "It's to do some fruitful work that has a payback."

But he said in an interview one of the problems in getting such a project off the ground is developing a list of specific, proven jobs that would require an operations station in orbit.

"We're sort of in the position we were back in the early '70s when we were trying to justify the shuttle," Covington said. Some of the missions proposed for the shuttle then have not developed, but other unexpected jobs have come along and the orbital transport is booked through 1985.

"We do think, of all the things we've studied, that there does seem to be a real need out there to construct some big things," he said. "We think that it ought to show an economic payoff."

The space operations center is now in the tentative study stage with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration spending \$500,000 this year on the effort. NASA administrator Robert Frosch says the concept is "fermenting."

To become a full-fledged project, it first has to have the OK from NASA management and then a station in Earth orbit, building current designs to eventually construct a station able to support several people in space for a year or two within five to 10 years. If NASA were to receive the go-ahead with the appropriate funding in 1983, Covington said the space operations center could be up and working in 1987. A likely plan, however, would be the project in 1985 and have operation by 1990. Covington estimated that the five-module space operations center would cost \$2 billion in 1979 dollars. He said a construction facility would add at least \$1 billion to the price.

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