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BUSINESS

Elon Musk's SpaceX Says It Signed Up Its First Round-the-Moon Tourist

The announcement came as a surprise but provided no specifics

A SpaceX Falcon Heavy rocket. The rocket was supposed to carry SpaceX's first space tourists company leaders are now aiming to use that rocket almost exclusively for unmanned missions. PHOTO: THOM BAUR/REUTERS

By Andy Pasztor

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Elon Musk's SpaceX, demonstrating its founder and chief executive's penchant for showmanship, announced that it had signed up the first private passenger seeking to fly around the moon. But the company provided no timetable or other details about the plan.

In a message on Twitter on Thursday, closely held Space Exploration Technologies Corp. said the mission is slated to use its largest rocket, dubbed the BFR, which is still under development and, according to some industry officials, may be at least a year or two from an initial test flight. Others speculated that, based on SpaceX's history, the BFR may not launch humans until the middle of the next decade.

In the message, however, SpaceX described the latest plan as "an important step toward enabling access for everyday people who dream of traveling to space." The identity of the passenger and other specifics are expected to be disclosed Monday.

Thursday's two-sentence statement—which caught a number of space experts off guard—suggests that Mr. Musk hopes to demonstrate momentum and attract more public attention to plans for his mammoth rocket and its associated spacecraft, intended to be bigger than a superjumbo airliner. As described previously by Mr. Musk, the BFR would be larger and more powerful than any rocket in history.

Revised proposals for both were unveiled earlier this year, at which time Mr. Musk indicated he hoped to use the combination to take private passengers, and ultimately U.S. astronauts, toward the moon and deeper into space.

But the latest development also highlights Mr. Musk's contrarian, sometimes unpredictable streak, as well as the frequently shifting outlines of his manned space-transportation strategy.

In early 2017, Mr. Musk shocked the aerospace community by announcing his intention to send two space tourists, who also weren't identified, around the moon by the end of this year. Those trailblazing flights were supposed to use a human-rated version of the company's existing Dragon spacecraft on top of a Falcon Heavy rocket—a 27-engine behemoth in which SpaceX has invested close to $1 billion. At the time, veteran industry officials expressed doubts about the projected timetable.

The first Falcon Heavy launched successfully earlier this year. But just the day before, Mr. Musk revealed the rocket already was in danger of being relegated to a backup role regarding future human flights.

Months later, a SpaceX spokesman confirmed the late-2018 timetable for the lunar-tourist mission had slipped to at least mid-2019 and likely longer.

Now, company leaders seem to have moved closer to scrapping those specific Falcon Heavy ambitions altogether, by aiming to use that rocket almost exclusively for unmanned missions such as launching commercial or military satellites. As a result Mr. Musk appears focused on accelerating BFR development as part of his broader human-exploration agenda.

As he has before, the billionaire entrepreneur, who also runs electric-vehicle maker Tesla Inc., may end up confounding naysayers about the capabilities of his team to develop and test the BFR, even if it takes longer than originally anticipated.

In May, Thomas Mueller, one of Mr. Musk's original SpaceX employees and the manager who has been in charge of designing every one of the company's rockets, told a space conference in Los Angeles he was devoting essentially all of his time to developing the BFR.

The reduced role for Falcon Heavy also comes as global demand for launches of large commercial satellites has slipped dramatically. Nearly all Wall Street analysts and industry experts expect launch contracts will remain at depressed levels for years to come.

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