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## National



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Posted on Wed, Jun. 16, 2004

### Georgia company to demonstrate a defense airship near Washington

 ELLIOTT MINOR  
 Associated Press

**ALBANY, Ga.** - A Georgia company plans to fly its 60-foot spherical airship near Washington this month to demonstrate the potential of using modern airships for homeland security, national defense and wireless communications.

Backers of the airships say they are cheaper than satellites and manned reconnaissance aircraft and would fill a gap between the two. They also say the ability of airships to maintain a stationary orbit over a target provides more persistent surveillance than unmanned spy planes that have to fly over their targets.

Techsphere Systems International, which will build its Aerosphere in Columbus, Ga., near the Army's Fort Benning, plans to demonstrate its airship to Washington lawmakers and government and military representatives from June 28 to July 2 in St. Mary's County, Md.

Proxity Digital Networks, Techsphere's marketing partner, announced this week that it had received two contracts for airship services, one from an undisclosed government agency for testing and integration services, and another from the Navy for tests and evaluation.

Mike Lawson, president of Techsphere, said the company also has formed a partnership with a major aerospace company and that announcement is expected in a few days.

Tests with surveillance gear are planned in August, Lawson said. He declined to disclose the location.

"We're ready to build a production-type airship starting this summer that you can buy," he said. "Think of us as a low-hanging satellite. We're a niche in the marketplace that will create a safer world."

The airships could carry the same types of highly classified surveillance gear as satellites and unmanned reconnaissance aircraft - high resolution cameras that can show a bug sitting on a leaf, infrared sensors that could detect insurgents planting roadside bombs at night in Iraq and over-the-horizon radar that could detect aircraft, missiles or ships. When used as communications platforms, they could provide wireless phone and Internet service.

Today's most visible airships have company logos plastered on their sides and hover over major sporting events. They trace their heritage to the Navy blimps that provided surveillance for allied convoys crossing the Atlantic Ocean during World War II.

Now researchers are updating lighter-than-air technology for the 21st century with new power systems and fabrics to help them survive even high-altitude missions in the stratosphere, where temperatures and solar radiation are extreme.

Techsphere's spherical Aerosphere is based on a design developed over 21 years ago by Canadian Hokan Colting of Canada, who set a world airship altitude record of 21,000 feet last year in a 62-foot version. His design is maneuvered by propellers mounted around the sides.

The Aerosphere would operate initially from 5,000 to 15,000 feet and remain aloft for about two days, Lawson said. At that altitude it would have to comply with the same Federal Aviation Administration regulations that govern Goodyear blimps and other aircraft flying over the United States.

It could operate manned or unmanned with up a payload of up to 1,000 pounds, he said.

Techsphere could train crews to fly its airships, or it could provide the crews, Lawson said.

The company is planning a 300-foot unmanned version that would operate at about 65,000 feet, well above the jet stream. Possibly powered by fuel cells and solar panels, it would remain aloft for six months to a year, Lawson said.

The Aerosphere's outer skin is made from tough Spectra fiber, an ingredient used in the body armor issued to U.S. troops in Iraq. An inner envelope made of mylar contains helium to provide lift.

John Robinson, managing editor of the Washington-based Defense Daily, said airships could provide additional intelligence for troops

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in Iraq who are being attacked almost daily by snipers and roadside bombs.

"I see this as a tremendous growth area because it's relatively cheap and it doesn't require a lot of people to operate," he said. "There's tremendous potential for the types of sensors you can put on."

**ON THE NET**

Techsphere Systems International: <http://www.techspheresystems.com/>

Zeppelin Luftschifftechnik: [http://www.zeppelin-nt.com/index\\_e.htm](http://www.zeppelin-nt.com/index_e.htm)

Deutsch Zeppelin-Reederei: <http://www.zeppelinflug.de/pages/E/haupt.htm>



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