



Everything Michigan



With News & Classifieds From: ANN ARBOR NEWS

SEARCH Pick Newspaper [dropdown] Enter Keyword(s) [input] GO [button]

FIND A BUSINESS Enter Category [input] GO [button]

- Home
- News+Biz
- Travel
- Sports
- Forums+Chat
- Cams+Radio
- Living
- Entertainment

CLASSIFIEDS

Get The Best Local...

[Jobs](#) | [Autos](#) | [Real Estate](#)

[All Classifieds](#) | [Place An Ad](#)

BUSINESS

NewsFlash

[NewsFlash Home](#) | [More Business News](#)

Business News

Interest grows in blimps for homeland security, defense

By ELLIOTT MINOR
The Associated Press
6/27/04 1:46 PM

COLUMBUS, Ga. (AP) -- In this age of laser-guided weaponry and real-time satellite communications, it may be difficult to imagine any interest in supplying the U.S. defense arsenal with fat, lumbering blimps.

But it's no joke. Backers of airships say they are cheaper than satellites and manned reconnaissance planes, and would fill a gap between the two. And, by hovering over a particular area, airships can provide more persistent surveillance than unmanned reconnaissance drones.

The blimps also could serve as communications platforms, providing wireless phone or Internet service.

"Think of us as a low-hanging satellite," said Mike Lawson, president of Techsphere Systems International LLC, which is gearing up to produce 60-foot and 200-foot versions of its "Aerosphere" spherical airship in Columbus, Ga. "We're a niche in the marketplace that will create a safer world."

Techsphere recently demonstrated a prototype of the smaller airship to Navy officials. The beach-ball-shaped blimp circled at an altitude of 1,500 feet with two men aboard to show its potential in airborne surveillance.

The airship was to be on public display at the St. Mary's County Airport outside Washington, D.C., on Monday.

Among Techsphere's rivals is defense contractor Lockheed Martin Corp., which has a \$40 million contract from the U.S. Missile Defense Agency to develop a high-altitude prototype in Akron, Ohio, home of the Goodyear blimps.

INSIDE Business

- » [Market Updates](#)
- » [Autos](#)
- » [BusinessWire](#)
- » [NewsFlash](#)
- » [Newspapers](#)
- » [PR Newswire](#)

» SEND THIS PAGE

» PRINT THIS PAGE

- » [Autos Forum](#)
- » [W. Mich. Business](#)
- » [More Forums](#)

» [Log On to ChatXtra!](#)

» GET YOUR LOCAL EDITION

» [Win \\$500 in Free Groceries!](#)

» [Bariatric Treatment Centers is now Barix Clinics. Learn More!](#)

» [Want to see a movie? Celebration Cinemas -- Click here!](#)

» [Advertise With Us](#)



The aerospace giant, which has built more than 300 airships since 1928, is sticking with the traditional blimp shape. But its 500-foot-long, 150-foot-wide prototype will be about 25 times larger than Goodyear blimps. Lockheed's unmanned craft would be controlled from the ground and operate at 65,000 feet.

G. Guy Thomas, a science and technology adviser for the Coast Guard, confirmed that the Coast Guard is considering airships for enhancing port security by detecting approaching ships 500 to 1,000 miles away.

"I think we're going to see some in the not-so-distant future," he said. "We're going to try to team with some people to buy one."

Airships date to 1783, and this wouldn't be the first time that they have been drafted for national defense. The Navy was using airships as long ago as the 1920s and '30s, when its biggest enemy was a threat that hasn't gone away: stormy weather.

In one of the worst Naval airship disasters, 73 crewmen were killed in 1933 when the USS Akron crashed in a storm off the New Jersey coast. Eight years earlier, 14 crewmen were killed when the USS Shenandoah was lost in a storm over Ohio.

"I think whoever is promoting airships is going to have a hard time getting past the weather because they're big and they're vulnerable," said Dave Fulghum, senior military editor for Aviation Week & Space Technology.

This time around, researchers have been updating lighter-than-air technology for the 21st century, with new power systems and fabrics to help them survive extreme temperatures and solar radiation in the stratosphere, well above the storms at lower elevations.

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 of Mylar polyester film contains helium to provide lift.

While a satellite can cost the government about \$150 million, airship developers say their craft would cost only a few million.

Anthony H. Cordesman, a defense expert with the Center for Strategic & International Studies, said airships have potential, but their future will depend on cost.

"Everything depends on the economics and obviously, the seller always touts the system," he said. "I've been listening to this for 20 years and very few people have bought any."

The Aerosphere is based on a design developed over 21 years by Hakan Colting, a Canadian who set a world airship altitude record of 21,000 feet last year. His design is maneuvered by propellers mounted around the sides.

Currently, the propellers are powered by gasoline engines that rotate up and down to fly the airship and hold it in position. They also can spin it on its axis, provide lift or land without the large ground crew and moorings required by blimps.

Developers are considering diesel generators mounted inside the airship to run electrically powered propellers that would improve performance and maneuverability. Higher altitude versions -- which would be safer from enemy fire -- may be powered by fuel cells and solar panels.

The Aerosphere would operate initially from 5,000 to 15,000 feet and

remain aloft for about two days. The company's 200-foot unmanned version would remain aloft for several months at about 65,000 feet, well above the jet stream and storms.

By comparison, the unmanned drone planes that the Border Patrol began using this month over the U.S.-Mexico border to spot illegal immigrants patrol at 12,000 to 15,000 feet. They can stay aloft for 20 hours at a time.

Aiming even higher in the sky, researchers at New Mexico State University's Physical Science Laboratory have proposed a futuristic balloon that would use wind flowing over its wings to hold it in a geostationary orbit without propulsion. It would operate at about 100,000 feet and remain in position for three months at a time.

"Airships have gone in and out of fashion as the mission requirements have come and gone," said John E. Pike, director of GlobalSecurity.org, a defense consulting group in Alexandria, Va. "There is probably more interest in airships today than there has been for some time. Whether any of that is going to pan out is a different question."

On the Net:

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

Lockheed Martin: <http://www.lockheedmartin.com>

» [Send This Page](#) | » [Print This Page](#)

MORE BUSINESS NEWS

» [American Greetings earnings tumble in 1Q](#) 4:38 p.m. ET

» [Big Movers in the Stock Market](#) 4:36 p.m. ET

» [Former Tenet CEO sues over WorldCom losses](#) 4:29 p.m. ET

» [More Stories](#)

[The Best Local Classifieds: Jobs](#) | [Autos](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Place An Ad](#)

Special Home Delivery Offers!



[Ann Arbor News](#) | [Bay City Times](#) | [Flint Journal](#)
[Grand Rapids Press](#) | [Jackson Citizen Patriot](#) | [Kalamazoo Gazette](#)
[Muskegon Chronicle](#) | [Saginaw News](#)

[About Us](#) | [Help/Feedback](#) | [Advertise With Us](#)

Use of this site constitutes acceptance of our [User Agreement](#). Please read our [Privacy Policy](#).
 ©2004 [MLive.com](#). All Rights Reserved.

