

ORLANDO

TECHNOLOGY

Rockets, defense, smart sensors: Orlando's tech scene gets big boost

BY MATTHEW RICHARDSON

Nowadays, it seems like Central Florida's technology sector has its head in the clouds – and that's not a bad thing when you're talking about the many rockets taking to the sky.

Companies like Hawthorne, Calif.-based SpaceX Inc. and Centennial, Colo.-based United Launch Alliance LLC have increased the frequency of rocket launches from Florida's Space Coast, each launching an average of twice a month to boost satellites, experiments and military cargo to orbit. And that increase is a big boost to the local economy, as the space industry carries a \$330 billion global impact price tag.

Additionally, Kent, Wash.-based Blue Origin LLC plans to launch its New Glenn rocket from Cape Canaveral in 2020. Blue Origin finished and opened its \$205 million, 750,000-square-foot rocket manufacturing center on Merritt Island in December, which will create 330 jobs paying an average annual salary of \$89,000. NASA will also launch its Space Launch System rocket from Kennedy Space Center in 2020, and Dulles, Va.-based Orbital ATK (NYSE: OA) will launch its new Omega rocket from Kennedy Space Center in 2021.

However, launch vehicles shooting to orbit are not the only space-related activity capturing attention for Central Florida. Under NASA's Commercial Crew Program, Chicago-based Boeing Co. (NYSE: BA) and SpaceX are each contracted to design, build and test capsules that will house astronauts and ferry them to and from the International Space Sta-



SPACEX

The Falcon Heavy took to the sky on Feb. 6.

tion. Manned missions have not taken place in America since the space shuttle program got axed in 2011, which resulted in 8,000 jobs being cut on Florida's Space Coast.

But since that time, the coast is bouncing back with even more job creation, and companies expanding and relocating to the area. In fact, from 2010-2018, Brevard County was able to attract nearly 50 companies and help fund expansions to generate an expected 8,000 jobs within a few years, according to the Space Coast Economic Development Commission.

Additionally, the Brevard Coun-

ty region reported just a 3.4 percent unemployment rate in April, with the manufacturing sector taking the lead by adding 1,300 jobs between April 2017 and April 2018, according to CareerSource Central Florida's most recent report. Roughly 217,200 people are employed in Brevard County – a nearly 1 percent increase from 215,300 in April 2017.

But space activity isn't the only hot sector for the burgeoning tech industry.

Defense firms like Lockheed Martin Corp. (NYSE: LMT), Harris Corp. (NYSE: HRS), Northrop Grumman Corp. (NYSE: NOC) and more help define Orlando

as the epicenter of modeling and simulation.

Bethesda, Md.-based Lockheed Martin has won more than a dozen contracts with work in Orlando worth billions of dollars for its F-35 stealth fighter jet, Trident II D5 nuclear missiles and Hellfire missiles. Each of those projects and programs support more than 7,000 of the firm's local employees. Plus, Lockheed Martin is planning to expand its workforce by 500 by building a \$50 million, 255,000-square-foot Research & Development II building at the company's existing 280-acre Missiles & Fire Control campus in southwest Orlando.

Lastly, innovative technology with smart sensors is also set to grow rapidly in Central Florida. The \$75 million, 109,000-square-foot Florida Advanced Manufacturing Research Center in Kissimmee cranked out its first smart-sensor wafer in May by using its high-tech equipment.

The center is managed and operated by Kissimmee-based Bridg, a group that will focus on researching and developing smart sensors – tiny computer chips that can connect any object to the internet. Smart sensors are expected to be a \$154 billion global market by 2020.

The center is also an anchor and magnet for Osceola County's 500-acre tech district, NeoCity, which has nearly 11 million square feet for commercial, industrial and residential buildings. Within the expected 50-year buildout for NeoCity, which will welcome dozens of companies ranging from commercial product makers to defense firms, the project is estimated to create 127,700 jobs with \$9.2 billion in total labor income.