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## Group propels effort to relocate Atlas rocket

By **Jeanette Steele**  
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**BALBOA PARK** – The San Diego Air & Space Museum wants to bring a nearly 100-foot Atlas rocket to Balboa Park and install it near the museum's parking area.

A private group of Atlas aficionados is raising \$150,000 to move the 48-year-old craft from its current spot at Gillespie Field in El Cajon, where it serves as a landmark for drivers along state Route 67.

“We thought it could be a beautiful icon for the park,” said Jacquelyn Collins, an Ocean Beach resident and Atlas committee member.

The Atlas has a legion of fans, including about 1,000 former missile program workers and friends who gathered last summer to celebrate its 50th anniversary.

But the reception for the rocket might not be so festive at Balboa Park, a nationally registered landmark with strict rules about its historic Spanish Colonial look. Changing more than a blade of grass is usually a challenge.

The Atlas proposal must go before San Diego's Balboa Park Committee and would require approval from the Historical Resources Board, the Park and Recreation Department and the City Council because the installation would require a change in the park's land-use plan.

The Federal Aviation Administration probably will require a formal study to make sure the Atlas' height wouldn't interfere with flight paths, a spokesman said. The park's signature California Tower, at 200 feet, is twice as tall.

County Supervisor Ron Roberts has committed \$80,000 from his allotment of community grants to the project if it passes all the hurdles. The County Television Network also produced a video on the missile's San Diego origins.

Vicki Granowitz, Balboa Park Committee chairwoman, said the public should weigh in on the idea.

“My main concern is that we make sure the public knows about the proposal and that they have an opportunity to participate,” Granowitz said. “With a project that will have this kind of prominence in a historical district, we just need to proceed carefully.”

The missile carries a hefty payload of local history.

The Atlas space program changed the character of San Diego in the late 1950s as the Convair division of General Dynamics hired 30,000 people to help design and build the rockets in Kearny Mesa and near Lindbergh Field.

In the 50 years since, Atlas rockets have carried astronauts into space, put the first commercial payloads into orbit and lifted probes that have explored every planet in the solar system. Loaded with nuclear warheads, Atlas missiles also stood by throughout the Cold War.

The rocket intended for Balboa Park is a model 2E built in 1960. It was a test missile once fired up at Convair's old Sycamore Canyon testing site near Poway, organizers said.

It stood at Kearny Mesa's Missile Park, on the former General Dynamics site at Lightwave and Overland avenues, from 1963 until 1996, when the land was redeveloped for housing.

Then the rocket was donated to the San Diego Air & Space Museum, which housed it at its Gillespie Field restoration annex.



Courtesy of the San Diego Air & Space Museum  
 An artist's concept shows how the Atlas rocket might be displayed in Balboa Park. A private group is behind the effort.

Organizers want to add a model of a Mercury space capsule on top as an homage to the late Wally Schirra, one of the original Mercury astronauts. Schirra, a San Diego resident for many years, died in May 2007.

They have raised \$40,000 in private donations, well over the \$24,000 threshold Roberts set before public funding could kick in.

Air & Space Museum President Jim Kidrick, who called the rocket an “appropriate symbol of our great heritage,” said if all goes well the Atlas could be in place in six months.

Support swelled at the Atlas' 50th anniversary party, which was an unexpected hit. It was envisioned as a simple one-day event, but so many former Convair and General Dynamics employees wanted to come that it turned into a three-day celebration, Collins said.

She said placement in Balboa Park would be the right tribute to those folks.

“It's a memorial to all those workers who built this thing with no textbook,” Collins said. “There was no recipe. We were in the space race, and they were told to just go do this.”

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■Staff writer **Steve Liewer** contributed to this report.

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