NEW IBERIA — It may sound like pie in the sky, but the Acadiana Regional Airport is being actively considered as the future home of the next generation of the space shuttle and the nation's first commercial spaceport.

The possibility that early in the next century the skies above New Iberia could be filled with the billowing clouds now associated with Cape Canaveral may seem far-fetched, but a number of factors make the site one of the best possible homes for the Venture Star project, say ARA backers.

There are at least 15 other states competing for the project and whichever area is chosen will benefit enormously, said Ken Johnson, spokesman for Rep. Billy Tauzin, R-Chackbay.

“An ideal location being considered is ARA and that would mean 10,000 new jobs at the old air base and countless more jobs in the New Iberia-Lafayette area,” Johnson said. “With the tremendous infusion of high-tech capabilities, Acadiana could become a hub of 21st Century technology.”

Airport Director Rock Lasserre confirmed that ARA is a candidate to become home of the Venture Star, but did not wish to comment further as numerous details need to be worked out on the proposal.

The Venture Star project is a multi-corporation and NASA consortium headed by aerospace giant Lockheed Martin. Venture Star's goal, Johnson said, is to build a reliable and cost-effective regular space shuttle service, with Lockheed's X-33 and X-34 delta-shaped spaceplanes carrying cargoes from satellites to space station parts to — further in the future — passengers.

Developed at Lockheed's “Skunk Works,” home of such aerospace legends as the U-2 spy plane, the X-33 and X-34 have been on the drawing board for years, with the design process currently in the last stages.
The spaceplane will take off in a fashion similar to a regular airplane, with massive hydrogen engines built by Boeing kicking in above 10,000 feet to propel the spaceplane into orbit. Landing will be almost identical to a current plane, only on a much longer runway.

Snaring Venture Star, while a definite possibility, is still some time away, said state Department of Economic Development Assistant Secretary Harold Price.

The selection process to choose Venture Star's operations and launch headquarters will have two steps, Johnson said. First, each of the other 15 states interested in becoming the home of Venture Star would first select its own first choice to pitch to the consortium. Then, each state will put its location up against the others and the consortium will make its choice.

Price said the state is seriously considering ARA, but that there are other possibilities, such as an old air base near DeRidder or England Airpark outside of Alexandria.

Outside of Louisiana, such places as Stennis Space Center in Mississippi and facilities outside Phoenix, Ariz., are also reportedly interested in welcoming the Venture Star.

However, Johnson sees ARA as the state's front-runner and Louisiana near the head of the pack overall.

The location near the Gulf Coast means that, while landing, any sonic booms would occur over water. Also, the longitudinal position of ARA in relation to the equator makes proper earth-orbit launches easier to handle, Johnson said.

Finally, Johnson said, the 2,200-acre ARA has more than enough space to house such aspects of the project as payload preparation and a runway that will be comparatively simple to upgrade to be able to handle the landing of the spaceplane.

In all, if Venture Star locates at ARA, about $500 million worth of building contracts, far less than some other potential sites, would be bid-out to transform the airport into a spaceport.

Though the project is decidedly long-term and the X-33 will not be taking off any time soon, Price said he hopes that a decision to choose Louisiana's entrant into the Venture Star stakes will be made by this fall.

"In the last few months, we have really intensified our efforts to submit ARA for consideration," Johnson said. "The countdown has begun."