Space Transportation:

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HEADLINE: **NASA Proposal Calls for** Space **Plane**

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BODY:

NASA is proposing to spend $2.4 billion over the next four years to design a new orbital **space** plane to ferry astronauts between Earth and the International **Space** Station.

In an amendment to the National Aeronautics and **Space** Administration's proposed 2003 budget, agency officials for the first time set a firm figure of $6.6 billion for completing assembly of the basic orbiting **space** station. That would bring the U.S. share of the international project to less than $25 billion, officials said Wednesday.

The precise cost of the **space** station, a project started during the Reagan administration, has been an unsettled issue for years between NASA and Congress. After the agency announced last year that it faced cost overruns that could reach more than $600 million, Congress put a $25 billion cap on the project. Sean O'Keefe, a former federal budget officer, was named NASA administrator in January with specific instructions from the White House to define and control the costs of the space station and other NASA programs.

In the budget amendment proposal, O'Keefe describes what he calls a "new integrated space transportation plan" that would complete the core components of the space station by 2004; extend the life of the aging space shuttle fleet; complete design of a new orbital space plane; and continue development of a new, reusable spacecraft and launch system to replace the shuttle.

He said the amendment would not add to the proposed NASA 2003 budget of $15 billion, but would redirect some funds.

O'Keefe said his plan inserts a "systemic approach" into NASA's space transportation activities, instead of having each element of space transportation acting as a separate program.

"All of the elements have a relationship to each other," O'Keefe said.

The budget amendment calls for spending:

-$1.6 billion to upgrade and improve the four-vehicle space shuttle fleet so it could operate until about 2012. The plan leaves open an option of extending shuttle usage into the 2020s.

-$15.2 billion over the next decade or so to add a fifth shuttle flight to the annual schedule. The shuttle has been limited by budget constraints to four flights a year and nearly all have been dedicated to assembly of the space station. The added flight could be used to accelerate station assembly or to perform other missions that are not now possible.

-$6.6 billion through 2006 to finish the basic assembly of the space station. This includes completion and installation by Feb. 19, 2004, of Node 2, a U.S.-made cornerstone component to which European and Japanese components will be attached. "Node 2 completion is a big deal for us," said O'Keefe.

-$1.8 billion to support biological and physical research aboard the space station.

-$2.4 billion to research and develop technologies needed to build a new space system to replace the shuttle. This money would continue a long-range effort to develop a reusable craft that could frequently fly into orbit with less preparation and effort than is required for the space shuttle. O'Keefe would not estimate the final cost of such a craft, but a chart released by the agency suggested it would first fly in 2015.

-$2.4 billion to complete by 2004 the design of a new space plane that is intended specifically to ferry people in and out of space. O'Keefe said the design is still uncertain, but it would be a reusable spacecraft launched by expendable rockets. It could carry as many as 10 people. The plan calls for the craft to start operations sometime between 2008 and 2010.

Some members of Congress have complained that the space station crew size has been limited to three, the maximum number that could crowd into the Russian Soyuz, an evacuation craft attached to the station as a safety measure. Since maintaining and operating the station requires almost the full-time efforts of the three-member crew, some in Congress say little science has been performed in the multibillion-dollar orbiting laboratory. An independent space plane could allow more people to live on the station and conduct more research.