U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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October 21, 2003

The Honorable Sean O'Keefe
Administrator
National Aeronautics and Space Administration
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. O'Keefe:

We are writing to express our deep concern with NASA's current approach to the Orbital Space Plane (OSP) program.

We have two primary concerns. First, NASA is proceeding with OSP development before we – the Congress, the White House, and NASA – have reached any agreement either on appropriate NASA goals for human space flight beyond the International Space Station or on the extent to which OSP is an appropriate approach to support those goals. Admiral Gehman testified before our Committee that:

> "… the right process would be to have a good healthy debate on what we want to do in space, agree on what it is we want this vehicle to do, then go into the design process and the cost process".

The recent creation of an inter-agency space policy group in the White House is testimony to the fact that the Nation has made no decision on the outline of its human space flight agenda. Therefore, neither the mission nor the benefits of the OSP are knowable at this point. We do know that OSP is not designed to replace the Shuttle, nor will it dramatically reduce the costs of access to space. It is even too soon to know whether OSP will significantly increase crew safety for missions to low Earth orbit, and we believe that any crewed replacement vehicle will be judged by the extent to which it significantly improves safety. Finally, it is unclear whether OSP will support longer-term human space flight goals.

Our second concern is that, given NASA's current cost estimates for the program, the OSP five-year budget plan that accompanied the FY 2004 NASA budget request is clearly no longer credible. Thus the credibility of the accelerated OSP program plan and cost estimate, formulated prior to decisions on the design of the OSP and in the absence of any cost estimates for NASA's other planned space transportation initiatives, also must be considered questionable. Prior human space flight projects at NASA have been plagued by problems stemming from the unrealistic cost estimates put forth at their inception. We are not prepared to let budgetary gamesmanship damage another NASA program.

The OSP program will not be successful on its current track We urge you to defer the current program until the inter-agency space review is completed, approved by the President, and thoroughly vetted with the Congress. At that point the Nation will have the shared vision that Admiral Gehman called for, and we will be able logically to develop the objectives for the nation's next crewed spacecraft, lay out design requirements consistent with those objectives, produce credible cost estimates and budget profiles to achieve those objectives, and delineate the costs and requirements for the other space transportation investments that will also have to be funded by the nation during that same time period. Without such consensus on a shared vision, progress on all of these steps will stall and public support for the Nation's civilian space program will inevitably founder.

We look forward to a constructive dialogue with you on these issues.

Sincerely,

SHERWOOD BOEHLERT
Chairman

RALPH HALL
Ranking Minority Member