

Middletown boldly going where no town has gone before

By [Jessica Heffner](#) Staff Writer

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MIDDLETOWN — Space: Middletown's new frontier.

Thanks to a new \$12 million NASA contract, a local facility will be manufacturing spacecraft heat shields for the U.S. government's newest intergalactic project.

Aeronca Inc., located at 2320 Wedekind Drive in Middletown, will use its honeycomb technology to make the titanium shields for NASA's Orion shuttle — an Apollo-style rocket meant to replace the current shuttle design used today, said Keith Wyman, the company's director of sales and marketing.

To make the shields, the company will sandwich the brazed honeycomb alloy between two 16-foot titanium plates and then melt them together. The honeycomb material is already made in Middletown, but the titanium will be imported from Titanium Metals Corp. in Toronto, Ohio, he said.

Previously, shields were made of a stainless steel-type alloy, which is lower priced. However, titanium weighs 54 percent less than stainless, said John Foy, human resources director for Aeronca.

"It was selected mainly for weight, it's key," he said. "Every ounce is very important when you are trying to throw something into space."

The tooling for the shields is still to be designed by NASA's prime contractor, Lockheed Martin, in Denver, Colo. Once those are determined, Aeronca officials said they will know the thickness needed to protect Orion from the extreme temperatures it will face while re-entering Earth's atmosphere.

Two test shields will be completed by late 2009, with a follow-on order from NASA for up to 28 more. If the government sticks with the Orion design, it means Middletown will be part of the space program for the foreseeable future, he said.

"The fact that Aeronca was able to procure a contract with NASA is huge news for them and for Middletown," said Bill Murphy, the city's economic development director.

It may be one small step for man, but it's one giant leap for Middletown, he said.

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