The United States is poised to spend billions of dollars to build a new stealth bomber. The top secret warplane could bring hundreds of jobs to the desert communities of Los Angeles County’s northern reaches.

Two teams of defense contractors are now battling to win what would be one of the most expensive contracts in Defense Department history. The decision to pick a winner as soon as this spring has set off a debate over whether the new bomber is crucial to national security or a colossal budget-busting waste.

“You're talking about a $2 billion airplane by the time they build it,” said Thomas Christie, who worked as a top analyst inside the Department of Defense for more than three decades before retiring. “It’s a disaster waiting to happen.”

But Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said last month: “I think the Long-Range Strike Bomber is absolutely essential to keep our deterrent edge.”
**Contractor Competition**

For elected officials across the country, however, the bomber contract means one thing: jobs. And as the teams led by giant weapons companies Northrop Grumman and Boeing Company try to win the support of lawmakers, the legislators want to know what their state will get out of the deal.

There are few places the lure of a new bomber can be felt more profoundly than Palmdale, California. Competing teams of contractors have each told local officials that they would perform much of the work in the area.

The new jobs would help revive the local communities, which have long played an outsized role in military aerospace history. The towns are still struggling to recover jobs lost in the recession that began about 2008.

**Job Prospects Are Huge**

Defense companies bidding on the contract cannot talk about it, Palmdale Mayor James Ledford said. “But we can.” And the prospects look good.

According to Ledford, Northrop executives have said they would build substantial parts of the bomber in Palmdale, creating about 1,500 jobs.

Rival Lockheed Martin Corporation, which is working with Boeing, also told city officials it planned to work on the new warplane in Palmdale, which could mean 700 jobs.

“It would be the answer to all our prayers,” said R. Rex Parris, mayor of neighboring Lancaster, California. The town has a 10.7 percent unemployment rate, far higher than the state average.

The decision is in the hands of the U.S. Air Force, which says it needs a bomber that is so secret it can evade the most sophisticated enemy radar.

Air Force officials have said the warplane would eventually be outfitted to carry nuclear weapons. They also want it to one day be capable of being flown remotely as a drone.

Other details are a closely guarded secret.

**Mostly In Secret**

To stem criticism of the program’s cost, military officials have vowed to limit the bomber’s price to $550 million each. The Defense Department included $1.2 billion for the bomber in this year’s budget. The Air Force plans to award the contract for as many as 100 of the new planes as soon as late spring.
An Air Force spokesman and executives from the companies said they could not say much. The bomber is part of the classified “black budget” for secret projects.

Located about 70 miles northeast of downtown Los Angeles, the Antelope Valley’s blue skies and open desert spaces make it a prime location for building and testing experimental military planes. For decades, Northrop, Lockheed and Boeing have leased hangars at the Plant 42 complex, where they share a runway with the Air Force.

There, Northrop developed and built the first stealth bomber, the B-2, in the 1970s and 1980s. The black boomerang-shaped aircraft was designed to penetrate the heart of the Soviet Union.

In 1987, about 10 percent of the nation’s aerospace jobs, nearly 200,000 workers, were in Palmdale and the rest of Los Angeles County.

The county’s aerospace employment fell nearly 70 percent — from 189,000 in 1990 to 59,200 in 2011.

**Budget Buster**

Boeing, Northrup and Lockheed have all previously won Defense Department contracts that ended up costing far more than planned.

During Northrop’s development of the B-2 stealth bomber, the secrecy surrounding the project helped allow costs to soar. The contract was so far over budget that the Defense Department eventually decided to build just 21 of the 132 aircraft it had originally planned. The average cost of each was more than $2 billion.

Todd Harrison is an analyst at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. He estimated in September that the stealth bomber program would ultimately cost $90 billion — or about $900 million for each plane.

The Air Force is already spending billions of dollars to modernize its current fleet of 150 bombers.

The Congressional Budget Office has repeatedly pointed to the new bomber as a program that could be cut. In 2013, its staff said that delaying the new bomber program for 10 years would allow engineers to use more advanced technology to improve its design.

**Building Behind Closed Doors**

New weapons developed in the next decade may even make the new bomber unnecessary, the office’s staff said.
But the Defense Department says it needs to begin work now on the new bomber. In fact, for years, defense officials may have been secretly paying for its development, analysts say.

Last year, congressional analyst Jeremiah Gertler said that based on budget figures, it appeared that models had already been built and were being tested.

Lancaster Mayor Parris said the bomber could end up creating jobs throughout the area, including at restaurants, stores and manufacturing suppliers.

“It would be so great,” he said, “to see it all come back.”