

Prairie dogs could be the first mammals to colonize Mars

By Patricia Laughin

Boulder County is looking to allocate money from the sustainability tax to fund a series of experiments that could lead to the first furry colonies in space.

“If things go well, we could see prairie dogs relocated to another planet within a matter of years,” said Agricultural Specialist G.D. Riddance. “Since prairie dogs already live in colonies, they are the perfect species to colonize Mars.”

Mars rover Perseverance will be needed to drill below the surface to see if there is enough frozen water to support plant life. Soil samples will also be gathered and analyzed to determine whether there is a sufficient amount of nitrogen and other nutrients on the red planet to grow perennial grasses. If the soil quality is poor, the county has offered to provide compost (from someplace other than Rainbow Open Space), potentially sequestering carbon on Mars as an added benefit.

If those experiments go well, CU LAPS space program would design a greenhouse-like facility to provide an oxygenated environment for the prairie dogs. It would be similar to the layout of the structure in the movie “The Martian,” minus the controversial biosolids deposited by actor Matt Damon.

LAPS would also build a relocation rocket, equipped with a patch of grass and burrows for the prairie dogs who would be fitted with tiny weights on their ankles to keep them from floating around in the capsule. Once they land, a robot, nicknamed the “Rodent Rover,” would deliver the prairie dogs to their new digs.

The project would relocate the last, persistent prairie dogs from Boulder County agricultural properties and give them freedom to roam Mars where they would be managed by Boulder County Parks and Outer Space.

CUTLINE: A prairie dog near Niwot is wary of the idea of being rocketed into space.

Photo by Patricia Logan