

Blimp is hard to miss



JENNIFER BUCHANAN / The Herald

Jason Woods detaches the mast from the Ameriquest Soaring Dreams Airship and pushes it off for takeoff Thursday at Paine Field.

Thousands of kids painted brightly colored airship

BY CHRIS COLLINS
Herald Writer

The first thought that goes through your head when you see it is: Why?

Why would a massive blimp covered in a modern-art montage of green, red, blue, orange, pink and yellow be flying around Everett?

The curious may be befuddled for the next two weeks, since the airship, as it's technically called, will be hanging and hovering around Paine Field until early August.

The 205-foot-long, multimil-

lion-dollar float is the largest flying public art project ever created, claims Ameriquest, a mortgage company that partnered with charity group Portraits of Hope to fund the blimp.

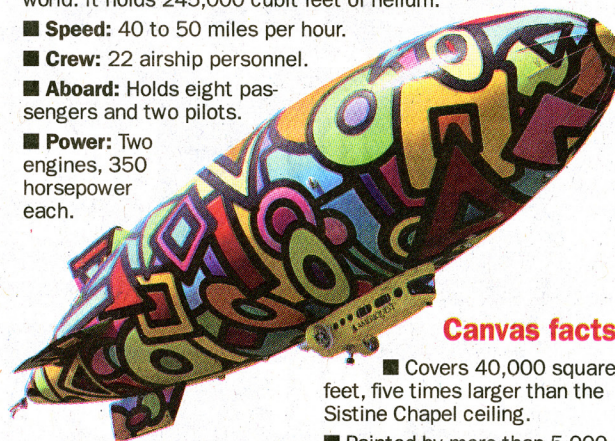
The Ameriquest Soaring Dreams Airship, unveiled in March and nearing the end of a national tour, used panels painted by 5- to 18-year-old kids in 50 cities across the nation.

Ameriquest says more than 5,000 kids at after-school

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About the blimp

- **Age:** 7 years. Its new look was unveiled in March.
- **Size:** 205 feet long, 65 feet tall — one of the biggest in the world. It holds 245,000 cubic feet of helium.
- **Speed:** 40 to 50 miles per hour.
- **Crew:** 22 airship personnel.
- **Aboard:** Holds eight passengers and two pilots.
- **Power:** Two engines, 350 horsepower each.



Canvas facts

- Covers 40,000 square feet, five times larger than the Sistine Chapel ceiling.
- Painted by more than 5,000 kids using 450 gallons of paint.

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Blimp: Kids painted ship

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programs and pediatric care facilities helped cover the 40,000-square-foot canvas with 450 gallons of paint, using hundreds of thousands of brushstrokes.

The Amerquest program developed special brushes for disabled children, such as a fruit-flavored paintbrush for those who couldn't brush with their arms or legs and held the brush with their mouths.

The blimp was then pumped full of 245,000 cubic feet of helium.

"You're going to talk funny for the rest of your life if you inhale that," said co-pilot Jose Bernaola on Thursday.

The imposing airship — easily spotted from miles away — will be touring area skies until it heads south to Los Angeles on Aug. 7. It will be based at Paine Field.

Amerquest is only allowing certain individuals to ride along, however, and is not selling tickets for rides.

But about 500 kids across the country have seen the ship up close and walked on board its eight-seat gondola, which holds the pilots and passengers.

Seeing the kids' reactions to the blimp "makes it all worth what we do," Bernaola said.

But what Bernaola and co-pilot John McHugh do seems to be a rather plush job.

"With a view like this, it's hard to beat," said McHugh, who has been a blimp pilot for 21 years, gazing at the landscape below him. "It's a really fun way to see the country."

The 22-person blimp crew, which travels in the ship and on a support truck around the country, includes pilots, engineers, mechanics and ground handlers. The nomadic group

doesn't seem to mind city-hopping its way through the summer.

"It's like when you want to run away and join the circus," said Mary Kenny, an Amerquest liaison between the airship and the company. "Well, we ran away and joined the blimp show."

Up in the air, the blimp handles like a large barge in the middle of the ocean. One tilt to the right, and a few seconds later the ship is veering right. A push forward on the controls, and from the co-pilot's seat it looks like the blimp is making a nose dive.

"Well, we're about 1,000 feet up, so it would take us a while to be in any danger," McHugh assured a reporter who was temporarily handling the controls.

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