President George W. Bush proposed in 2004, this White House is more intrigued by human missions to asteroids, Phobos, and Deimos as a precursor to landing humans on the Red Planet. That option was given particular prominence by Augustine panel members when they testified this fall before congressional committees. To prepare for human visits, NASA may order additional robotic missions to the martian moons and asteroids.

Before making his decision, Obama reviewed several options presented to him by NASA, the Office of Management and Budget, and the Office of Science and Technology Policy. The choices included keeping NASA’s budget flat and delaying a new launcher, giving it an additional $1 billion to build a heavy-lift launcher, ramping up NASA’s annual budget by $3 billion for an aggressive program, or reducing NASA’s budget and abandoning space flight. The president’s decision to go with the second option is a major departure from his 2010 budget plan, which called for NASA to receive a 5% increase in 2010 followed by level funding through 2014.

The Augustine panel concluded that NASA needed a $3 billion annual increase to move ahead with a robust space-flight program. Last month, Congress belatedly completed action on NASA’s 2010 budget, boosting it by $1 billion, to $18.7 billion. An additional $1 billion in 2011, combined with support from other countries, would put the agency close to the panel’s suggested level. “There are a lot of different ways to reach that level, including help from abroad and increasing NASA’s efficiency,” Augustine added.

It’s not clear when the new policy will be formally announced. One White House source said it was imminent, while another hinted that it would wait until Obama’s State of the Union address in late January. Another possibility is a 1 February release as part of the president’s 2011 budget request to Congress. Given the White House’s preoccupation with health care and climate change, however, NASA officials and their industry backers see the new policy as welcome proof that Obama also cares about space flight.

—ANDREW LAWLER