

## Central Health board eyes new teaching hospital

By [Mary Ann Roser](#)

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As plans gel for a proposed medical school in Austin, taxpayers might play a key role.

The board of Central Health, a taxing authority that oversees health care programs for low-income Travis County residents, weighed in as a group Saturday and embraced the idea of rebuilding University Medical Center Brackenridge, Austin's public hospital, which is owned by Central Health. Board members, attending a 5½-hour retreat to build consensus on their vision for a medical school, said they support a premier teaching facility and trauma center for training doctors in primary and specialty care, as well as teaching them to work in clinics that serve the poor.

The board also said, among other goals, it wants to play an influential role in developing the medical school concept so doctors gain experience in its clinics and stay in the community, alleviating a shortage of physicians. The board said it placed a high priority on seeing that its patients are treated like others in the community, regardless of income.

An Austin medical school has been gaining momentum since September, when state Sen. Kirk Watson, D-Austin, championed it as part of a 10-point plan that includes opening a new teaching hospital, creating a comprehensive cancer treatment center, expanding mental health services, bolstering the Travis County medical examiner's office and modernizing community health clinics — all in 10 years. Watson said he expects Central Health to play a key role and named three of its nine board members to an organizing committee to make his plan happen. (Board member Frank Rodriguez was absent Saturday.)

Watson has declined to put an estimated price tag on his ambitious plan, saying that would be premature. The Central Health board did not take official action Saturday, saying that would come later. It also did not discuss any financial details and did not say whether it imagined that it would invest alone in rebuilding UMC Brackenridge or sharing costs with other entities, such as the Seton Healthcare Family, which operates the hospital.

The board, however, did go into closed session to discuss "Central Health revenue options," board attorney Beth Devery said.

When questioned about the legal justification for an executive session, Devery cited two sections of state law that she said allowed the session. One section says governmental bodies may discuss financial planning information and bids in private to not disadvantage the board in competitive negotiations for products or services; the other allows private discussions of financial information that the governmental body has received from a business prospect with which it is conducting economic development negotiations.

Devery said she could not be more specific for legal reasons but emphasized that the board did not have a policy discussion about financial options for a medical school or teaching hospital.

Some other portions of the meeting that were intended to be closed were later held in open session.

"We're supportive of the (Watson) plan, and we're prepared to invest," assuming certain conditions important to the board are included, said Central Health board member Clarke Heidrick, who is on Watson's committee as chairman-elect of the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce.

Heidrick said he wanted to make sure that any Central Health dollars spent on the project were tied to accountability measures so the board had some control. He also urged that spending be transparent to taxpayers so they could trace how their dollars were being used.

Board Chairman Dr. Tom Coopwood, also a member of the Watson committee, said after the meeting that the board doesn't yet know how much rebuilding UMC Brackenridge might cost or where Central Health might get the money. But, he said, "it costs about \$1 million a bed, so ... \$250 (million) to \$300 million."

Central Health could come up with money for the project by issuing debt through bonds or increasing taxes on Travis County residents, Coopwood said.

Central Health has a long-term lease agreement with the Seton Healthcare Family to operate the hospital at 15th and Red River streets, which was started in the 1970s and completed in the 1980s.

Whether the hospital is gutted and rebuilt or extensively renovated — if at all — remains to be seen. "I think it's a work in progress," Heidrick said.

**Courtesy of JB Goodwin**