

Texas A&M looks at Avery land for medical school

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Texas A&M University representatives have been talking with the Avery family -- owners of more than 1,000 acres in Williamson County -- about securing a potential site for its medical school.

Jenny Jones, vice president of governmental affairs at the Texas A&M Health Science Center, declines to say what shape development on that land may take or what it may cost, but she says building A&M's physical location will be the centerpiece of the school's future plans in Williamson County.

The site university representatives and the Avery family are talking about is near the southwest corner of FM 1460 and CR 112, near Seton Family of Hospitals' planned Seton Medical Center Williamson and Texas State University's Round Rock Higher Education Center. Exactly how many acres A&M might use is still undetermined, Jones says, because initial discussions about exactly what shape the campus would take are still under way.

"We are talking to them about a potential site in the growing medical and educational complex we're developing on **University Boulevard**," says John Avery.

As reported by the Austin Business Journal on June 15, at the end of this year's legislative session **A&M received \$19 million from the state to expand its existing** medical program in Temple and establish a third- and fourth-year program in Round Rock. Approximately **\$9 million** of that \$19 million is dedicated to establishing the **clinical program in Round Rock**, says Rep. Dan Gattis, R-Georgetown, which will put medical students directly in hospitals by the end of 2008. Texas A&M has a partnership with Scott & White, which it will continue in Round Rock, and Gattis says the university is also talking with Seton and St. David's HealthCare about potential partnerships.

Many eyes have been on the University of Texas' medical branch in anticipation of a medical school, but UT System spokesman Anthony deBruyn says UT is concentrating at this point only on building its medical research and collaboration centers in Central Texas.

At the time it secured the funding, A&M health science officials said the university would build up its clinical program, eventually establishing a four-year medical school in Williamson County. Securing land to begin that process will be a key first step, Gattis says, and because the university is already accredited, building a four-year campus will be a matter of bringing physical structures, professors and students into place.

"The real limiting factor is the clinical patient load, and that's what Round Rock brings to us," Gattis says. "There's an opportunity to work with a patient load and do clinical studies."

A&M isn't the only educational institution building a medical-focused presence in Round Rock. Texas State University's new Round Rock Higher Education Center received \$35 million from the Legislature to build a new nursing school, and a potential Austin Community College campus in the city could have a nursing program, Avery says.

Joe Vining, vice president of economic development for the Round Rock Economic Development Partnership, says marrying health care and education will be an economic boon to the corridor with long-lasting implications.

"The combination of medical and education together can probably be a bigger story than Dell was in the history of our city," he says. "It's hard to underestimate the power that this has in the development of the community."

Courtesy of JB Goodwin