

UT sites considered for medical school

Three possible locations near hospital are especially attractive.

By [Ralph K.M. Haurwitz](#)

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Three parcels on the University of Texas campus have emerged as possible locations for a medical school in Austin because of their proximity to the University Medical Center at Brackenridge.

The sites are also near the UT School of Nursing, which would enhance opportunities for collaboration in patient care and research.

The UT System Board of Regents is expected to decide in two to four months whether to establish a branch campus in Austin of the UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas, the state's most prestigious public medical school.

System officials say a number of locations are under consideration. Of the three UT-Austin locations said to be in the mix, one is a parking lot next to the Erwin Center and directly across 15th Street from the University Medical Center, which, despite its name, is not an arm of UT-Austin or any other university.

The second is cater-corner from the hospital on land occupied by woods, tennis courts and Waller Creek. The third is a few blocks north, at the northwest corner of Red River Street and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, and is used for parking.

A possible fourth parcel is adjacent to UT-Austin's Dell Pediatric Research Institute. The institute is under construction at the former Robert Mueller Municipal Airport site that is also home to the Dell Children's Medical Center of Central Texas.

"The Board of Regents has not had formal discussions concerning locations for expanding medical education programs in Austin," said Anthony de Bruyn, a UT System spokesman. "Everything's on the table."

The two sites closest to the University Medical Center seem especially compelling because of their proximity to the center.

The parcel next to the Erwin Center runs from Red River Street to the Interstate 35 frontage road and consists of 460 parking spots along with live oaks, other trees and a grassy strip. An above-ground or underground garage presumably could be built at the site. The other parcel, along Waller Creek at the northwest corner of Red River and 15th streets, is a tad farther away but still within easy walking distance.

John McDevitt, a UT professor of chemistry and biochemistry, said having a hospital within walking distance would be invaluable for researchers like him with bench-to-bedside projects.

McDevitt is working on a saliva test to detect whether a patient is having a heart attack. One challenge he faces is getting fresh saliva samples. Medical colleagues in San Antonio take samples from patients and freeze them before shipping them to him. Collaborating with physicians at a medical school close to a hospital in Austin would allow him to study fresh samples, which he prefers.

Executives of the region's two major hospital systems — the Seton Family of Hospitals and St. David's HealthCare — said they've heard about the possible locations.

"It wouldn't surprise me that high on the list of options would be real estate close to the hospital," said Greg Hartman, Seton's senior vice president, referring to the University Medical Center. Seton operates the medical center for the Travis County Healthcare District.

Jon Foster, president and CEO of St. David's, said hospitals in his system do not have sufficient acreage adjacent to them to accommodate a medical school. Nevertheless, the locations under consideration are close enough to the St. David's Medical Center at 32nd and Red River streets to generate "a fair amount of synergy," Foster said.

"St. David's is in discussions with the UT System about how we will be involved going forward," Foster said.

It's not clear when UT Southwestern will complete a study on the feasibility of a branch campus. The UT System declined to release the records sought through an open records request, citing competition for donors, community support and legislative support with the Texas A&M University System, which is farther along in establishing a medical school in Round Rock. The state attorney general's office ruled that the UT System could withhold the information.

"The regents are looking forward to receiving the feasibility study, and what they will do and how they will move forward are yet to be determined," de Bruyn said. "That said, the regents remain very committed to expanding medical education programs in Austin."

Cost is a major consideration. Kenneth Shine, the UT System's executive vice chancellor for health affairs, has said that it would take "hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars" to establish a medical school.

"Many, if not all of us in the city, recognize that the city is going to have to meaningfully contribute to this as well," said Council Member Brewster McCracken. "That could take the form of donated land or even a bond election to provide almost a partnership contribution of funds."

Patricia Young Brown, president and CEO of the healthcare district, said her agency doesn't fund medical education but would pay for care that a medical school would provide to indigent patients.

Financial support from individuals, businesses and the community is essential, said Michael Rollins, president and CEO of the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, who added that the prospect of a medical school had created a certain buzz.

"We're extraordinarily optimistic," Rollins said. "The timing may be as good as it's ever going to be."

Medical school sites

Below are potential sites for a UT medical school, should the university system regents decide to establish one.

● Potential sites



Courtesy of JB Goodwin