

## Construction cranes at Medical Center tell the story

By LYNN COOK

In seven years, the Texas Medical Center could rival downtown Houston in terms of existing office space.

That's because a multibillion-dollar building boom has taken hold, as hospitals and universities race to build an additional 12 million square feet of space dedicated to everything from more patient beds to molecular medicine research. The sprawling 1,000-acre campus that stretches from Rice University to Reliant Stadium is roughly the same size as Lower Manhattan's Financial District. And if all the projects scheduled for construction come to fruition by 2014 as planned, the Medical Center will measure 39.6 million feet, according to CoStar Group, a national real estate survey company. That would put it in the same league as downtown — even with developers planning four new office buildings in the Central Business District.

So far, 17 new projects valued at \$3 billion have broken ground, Dr. Richard Wainerdi, president and CEO of the Texas Medical Center, says. Another \$5 billion worth are on the way, but some hospital boards and administrators are keeping expansion plans close to the vest until all details get hammered out.

Estimates from the Texas Medical Center show roughly half the new space will be dedicated to patient care. The rest will be fairly evenly divided between research facilities and education and office space.

Projects range from an advanced research complex for the University of Texas Health Science Center to more hospital floors and an additional parking garage for the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center.

### New outpatient tower

Already under way on Main Street is a new outpatient tower for The Methodist Hospital System that will house day surgery and a cancer treatment center. Also, Baylor College of Medicine is moving forward with an entirely new hospital on land near the corner of Old Spanish Trail and Cambridge. The two institutions, which had collaborated for decades, split three years ago.

Texas Children's Hospital has several projects under way, including a special maternity center and a Neurological Research Institute, which will focus on the study and treatment of pediatric disorders including autism, Down syndrome and childhood epilepsy.

### Scientific breakthroughs

So what's driving all the construction?

Wainerdi says it's the need for expanded patient care and scientific breakthroughs on complex diseases. Naysayers fret that sweeping changes in the health care industry coming from government or industry could make the new development obsolete.

But Wainerdi is not worried.

"We have a wave of baby boomers who will only need more care," he says,

adding that Houston's population is projected to grow by 2 million people by 2025.

"Whether reimbursement plans will be adequate or not going forward, we don't know."

The most recent building to come online in the Medical Center is The University of Texas Medical School's Replacement Research Facility, where work on infectious diseases, stem-cell regeneration and neuroscience takes place.

#### Research animal center

The facility has been needed since Tropical Storm Allison in 2001 flooded basement labs, killing thousands of research animals, the majority of which were genetically altered rodents. The six-story building, which houses the Center for Laboratory Animal Medicine and Care, opened two weeks ago. It has a groundfloor elevation 48 feet above sea level, and the animals are housed on higher floors.

#### Constrained infrastructure

The Texas Medical Center's landscape began to noticeably change a year ago when the Memorial Hermann Medical Plaza opened.

The 30-story black skyscraper with an enormous funnel shape at the top sits at the north end of the Medical Center's main campus, between Main and Fannin. It houses the Roger Clemens Institute for Sports Medicine and Human Performance, a diagnostic imaging center, ambulatory surgery services and, of course, 10 floors of parking.

Constrained infrastructure, parking shortages and too few access routes have long been flashpoints of debate for the 73,000 people who work in the Medical Center and the 5.5 million patients who receive treatment there every year.

#### Mass transit is key

Another 23,500 parking spaces are to be created across the Medical Center between now and 2014, bringing the total to 72,181. But health care growth is expected to create 30,000 new jobs in the area over the same time period, bringing employment to about 100,000, Wainerdi said.

Whether all this expansion will snarl traffic or create massive flooding depends heavily on the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, the Harris County Flood Control District and other government agencies to complete drainage projects and widen and extend streets and feeder roads, according to the Texas Medical Center's updated 50-year master plan.

That document calls for improved direct bus service to the area, mass transit to areas not currently served, and the successful development of commuter rail initiatives by 2010. Medical Center officials are also counting on at least 20 percent of all employees and students taking mass transit into the area every day, according to the master plan.

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