

Texas Medical Center's future 500-acre BioPort campus a 'game changer,' TMC CEO says

By Sophia Gonzalez | October 10, 2022

The Texas Medical Center's future 500-acre BioPort campus is expected to meet some of the biggest remaining needs of the local life sciences ecosystem, TMC President and CEO Bill McKeon says.

Announced at the recent State of the TMC event, the campus will focus on cell and gene therapy — a method that takes cells out of the body for correction through highly sophisticated biomanufacturing then places them back into the body to treat diseases — as well as manufacturing and distribution for pharmaceuticals and medical supplies.

McKeon told the Houston Business Journal talks for this campus began when the pandemic hit. During the height of Covid-19, each member institution of the medical center had to pull their requests together to make one order for personal protection equipment, vaccines and ventilators from Europe and Asia. However, during this time, the orders also were met with a lot of theft, creating additional problems.

“A lot of the focus right now is, 'How do we make sure that Houston has a major distribution area in the event of another pandemic or major environmental event?’” McKeon said. “It's really about national security. A number of events that have taken place over the last two years, three years since the pandemic has made us really see the value of TMC BioPort.”

The BioPort campus will ensure a continuously replenished supply of PPE. Currently, TMC is working with Gov. Greg Abbott and his emergency management team to make sure there is an active supply chain for its 60-plus member institutions.

Also, as member institutions such as the University of Texas MD Anderson, Baylor College of Medicine and UTHealth, to name a few, continue to develop new drugs, they need more facilities like what BioPort will provide, McKeon said.

In all, the BioPort campus is expected to create 100,000 jobs. The new jobs will not just be for people who have earned Ph.D.s — TMC aims to incorporate students right out of high school with an education campus in the middle of BioPort, he said. TMC plans to partner with Texas A&M University, Houston Independent School District and others to bring the education component to fruition.

“It's a real game changer for Houston,” McKeon said. “It's a game changer for it's another feather in the cap of the already amazing medical city that we are proud to curate. This will be the largest jobs program in Texas.”

McKeon said TMC BioPort's job-creation impact will surpass that of TMC Helix Park, formerly called TMC3. Along with the job growth, BioPort is expected to have a \$54 billion annual impact that will be seen over the years to come.

He called BioPort the last piece needed for the structure of Houston's life sciences ecosystem.

“You need the minds; we've had them here for years with our 120,000 employees at the medical center,” McKeon said. “You need a place where an industry can work side by side, and that's what Helix Park brings. You need an early-stage incubator, and that's what our Innovation Factory brings. And now, you need biomanufacturing, so when you're developing new drugs and therapies, you want to test those lines locally, close by so you can deliver them to patients.”

TMC BioPort's campus will be near the intersection of Buffalo Speedway and Holmes Road, west of Wildcat Golf Club and about a mile south of the 610 Loop. It will be constructed in phases. Information about the owners of the land and additional details could not be made available right now.

The master plan for the campus is being done by David Manfredi of Elkus Manfredi Architects, the same Boston-based firm that designed TMC Helix Park. With \$100 million invested for infrastructure, McKeon expects to break ground on construction as early as the first quarter of next year. So far, TMC has spent \$5 million on preparations, and plans to spend another \$5 million in the next six months as part of the due diligence stage.

McKeon emphasized that since the project is in the due diligence stage, anything could happen that could cause TMC to call it off. Although he does not see that happening, McKeon said it is important to keep in mind how early on the project is.

As for TMC's future, McKeon said further innovation and technological advancements are on the horizon.

“We're only limited by our imagination and the advancement of technology, but I find it terribly exciting that the Texas Medical Center is not the medical center of old where it was just a place where you went and got care,” McKeon said. “I think now we're really broadening and spreading our wings into the natural areas where innovation and discovery and converting those discoveries to human benefit are just a natural place for them to fit into the Medical City.”