



*Photo by UT Austin*

## UT hopes to play leading role in Austin's evolving development scene

THURSDAY, MARCH 27, 2025 BY CHAD SWIATECKI

At Wednesday's Urban Land Institute Austin breakfast discussion, interim University of Texas President Jim Davis offered a candid assessment of the university's evolving role in Austin's booming development scene. Once regarded as one of the city's largest builders and employers, Davis said UT now finds itself competing for attention alongside tech giants and multibillion-dollar infrastructure projects transforming the area.

"There was a point in time that UT was like the big builder in town. We're not anymore, not in this town," Davis said, pointing to challenges

the university faces in attracting contractors and improving its partnerships. "We're struggling to be in the top 10 anymore of people who want to come work for us. ... Sometimes we're hard to work with."

Those remarks, delivered to a room full of developers and land use professionals, touched on the university's long-term ambitions to reshape its real estate strategy, including plans to [install caps](#) over portions of Interstate 35 near campus, expand student housing and better align future construction with Austin's workforce and economic development goals.

With the Texas Department of Transportation's highway expansion project set to lower the freeway below grade, Davis said UT is actively exploring how it can partner with state and local stakeholders to create new public space or even campus-linked development atop the freeway.

The potential caps, which would span several blocks from the area where the Frank Erwin Center once stood down toward 15th Street, are part of UT's broader effort to re-stitch the physical and cultural fabric that I-35 has long divided. Davis acknowledged the complex and uncertain path ahead. The cap concept remains in a preliminary phase, with no firm commitments for funding, design or governance. Final decisions may be years away and hinge on TxDOT's construction timeline, city buy-in and the university's own evolving development priorities.

Despite that uncertainty, Davis made clear that UT wants to play a leading role in shaping the conversation. The university is treating the cap as a once-in-a-generation chance to influence the urban edge of campus – whether that results in academic buildings, green space or new connections to East Austin.

Davis spoke candidly about the pressures involving student housing, with the university needing to add to the 9,000 student beds it currently offers as well as to engage in more public/private partnerships to add more privately funded housing on West Campus and elsewhere.

"If you had to go live 7 or 8 miles away or even farther, you reduce how much you get engaged with the university. So our goal is to get students onto campus, and housing is a tool to get there," he said. He added that the university is working toward adding a housing stipend to the financial aid packages for students who receive free tuition.

"We put cash towards your financial aid to offset the cost of rent if you live on or in our property."

Davis said he has started talks with Mayor Kirk Watson about the best possible use of the Brackenridge tract, with the university also looking to raise \$1.4 billion in federal and state funding to revamp its Montopolis property for the next generation of semiconductor manufacturing.

Davis framed both sites as long-term assets that could help UT contribute more directly to Austin's evolving economic identity. He emphasized that the university is no longer just a passive educational institution, but a "deliberate participant" in regional planning conversations, particularly those related to advanced industries like semiconductors, AI and life sciences.

With federal incentives flowing into domestic chip manufacturing through the CHIPS and Science Act, Davis said UT is positioning the Montopolis site to support future partnerships with industry leaders, state workforce agencies and research institutions. He noted that the university's proximity to Samsung's Taylor facility, as well as Central Texas' broader tech corridor, makes it an ideal location for education-to-employment pipelines in high-skill sectors.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chad Swiatecki is a 20-year journalist who relocated to Austin from his home state of Michigan in 2008. He most enjoys covering the intersection of arts, business and local/state politics. He has written for Rolling Stone, Spin, New York Daily News, Texas Monthly, Austin American-Statesman and many other regional and national outlets.

STORIES BY CHAD SWIATECKI

### KEY PLAYERS & TOPICS IN THIS ARTICLE

**Montopolis:** An East Austin neighborhood bounded by Grove Street to the west, Texas State Highway 71 to the south and the Southeast Austin neighborhood and U.S. Route 183 to the east. It is located in District 3.

**TxDOT:** The transportation agency for the State of Texas.

**University of Texas:** The preeminent state university whose flagship is located in Austin.

**Urban Land Institute**

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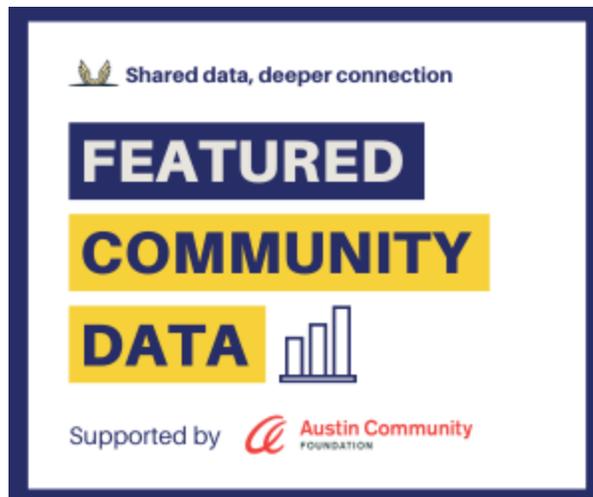
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