

# Metro Orlando awaits jobs bonanza at Lake Nona medical city

By Mary Shanklin  
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Next month, officials will dedicate the **Burnham Institute** for Medical Research, crown jewel of the medical city emerging in southeast Orlando. Come spring, the new building for the **University of Central Florida's** College of Medicine will open there, too.

Amid the fanfare, what few may realize is that most of the big projects anchoring the Lake Nona development are about a year behind their announced schedules.

Out beyond the city's international airport, Lake Nona Country Club and even a few cow pastures, the three-story Burnham Institute was expected to open as early as last summer. It was completed in April instead.

Just down a lighted, manicured boulevard from the school, the UCF medical school was originally expected to open last fall. The first students started classes this fall in temporary quarters near the main UCF campus, but classes at Lake Nona won't start until next summer. Next door to the med school, both UCF's Burnett School of Biomedical Sciences and the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center of Orlando were expected to open about a year ago. They are now shooting for next month.

Backers of some of the projects say their facilities have benefited from the delays, but the slowdowns have not helped a region desperate for jobs. Metro Orlando's unemployment rate is nearly 11 percent.

"The delay is unfortunate, in that hires by the College of Medicine would have boosted the Orlando housing market when the timing could not be better," said David Denslow, a **University of Florida** economics professor. "But I'm sure it's important to get the design right for the long haul."

## Working 'in overdrive'

Rasesh Thakkar, senior managing director of the Tavistock Group, Lake Nona's owner, said the opening of the various medical-city buildings in coming months will still help the region's economic recovery.

Construction deadlines were never chiseled in stone, he said. And though some of the buildings have missed their original targets for opening, the emergence of a medical city just three years after roads, interchanges and utilities were put in required a Herculean effort at many levels, Thakkar added.

"It couldn't have happened faster," he said. "In my travels, what I have heard people say is that Lake Nona and medical city are in overdrive."

Denslow said the biggest effect of the medical-city slowdowns on the local economy is the delay in new jobs, and the shot in the arm those paychecks would have given an economy suffering through the longest recession in many decades.

Burnham has promised to eventually employ at least 300 scientists and staff, while the medical school expects to have 350 jobs once fully up and running. In addition, the two facilities — combined with the Burnett school, other research operations, a Nemours Children's Hospital and a Department of Veterans Affairs hospital — are projected to attract or generate thousands of additional jobs in coming years.

There have been silver linings in the delays: Key players say they benefited from lower construction costs during the economic downturn. Nemours and the Department of Veterans Affairs, which years ago had announced separate plans to build hospitals elsewhere in Orlando, now talk of the synergies their hospitals will enjoy when they open in the medical city about three years from now. And the added time allowed M.D. Anderson to carve out more-functional research facilities from the space it's leasing inside Burnham's new lab.

Cheryl Baker, Orlando director of M.D. Anderson's expanding cancer center, said construction sometimes takes longer than expected, particularly on a complex project with medical laboratories.

"The delay, if you will, has allowed us to walk square-by-square and say, 'This is really what we want,'" she said.

### **Extras at Burnett**

The UCF Burnett building was actually the first project to emerge from the pack, but it had originally been envisioned for construction on the main campus, so accommodating the move to Lake Nona added to the process, said James L. Zboril, president of Lake Nona Land Co. And it underwent the most construction change orders — about 140, compared with 30 for the College of Medicine — partly because crews had to install the area's first roads and utilities.

During construction, officials opted to add extras to the lab space and a vivarium for animal testing, including \$16,000 for textured floors where spills could have led to falls; \$7,400 for a sanitary railing to protect walls; and \$20,000 for video cameras. To make up for the added costs, officials cut items such as \$347,000 for access-control cameras and \$384,000 for an animal-watering system. They tried to cut landscaping and exterior lighting by about \$1 million, but Lake Nona's developer required them to add back much of the lush plantings.

"It is more lush, if you will, than what we would have put in," said Jack Price, UCF's interim director of facilities planning. "At the time, we would have rather spent the money in other ways, but it does blend with everything else there. If you had come down that boulevard and we had not changed it, it would have looked very stark in comparison."

In addition to the delays in planning, Burnett's construction took an extra two months. The project stayed on budget, largely because the school saved money by purchasing materials itself, thereby saving on sales tax.

According to Zboril, work on the medical-school building was delayed as UCF changed the facility's design from that of a typical office structure to that of an institutional landmark that could set the tone for other buildings in the complex.

UCF officials say that, without a dean in place and with accreditation still being sought, the decision was made three years ago to delay the school's opening from 2008 until 2009.

The university has made a number of changes to the College of Medicine during construction, but it has stayed on budget and on schedule. Changes have included trimming items, such as a drop-down ceiling in the cadaver cooler, and spending more than originally planned on the main lecture hall.

UCF added about \$464,000, for instance, to equip each lecture-hall seat with data and power outlets. Like its next-door neighbor, the Burnett building, the College of Medicine also added more to the exterior, upgrading a trellis and equipping a tower with a GPS synchronization clock.

### **Building in phases**

Burnham's building was constructed at a fast pace, despite some scheduling challenges. At one time, for instance, Burnham had demolition money budgeted to rebuild parts of the interior once the scientists using those spaces were hired and could approve the design, Zboril said. But Burnham and local officials figured out a way to do the work in phases instead, as more and more researchers came on board.

Meanwhile, plans for a University of Florida research institute on a fallow plot of land next to Burnham continue to evolve, though UF officials say the university hasn't yet acquired the land.

The various delays in Orlando's medical city are minor compared with the setbacks experienced by the Scripps Research Institute in Palm Beach County. The biotech giant, which chose South Florida over Orlando and **Lake Nona** in October 2003, dedicated its East Coast lab in February, more than five years after it was announced. During that time, Palm Beach County spent \$100 million preparing one site for Scripps before having to switch to another site that cost it \$187 million.

After failing to land Scripps, **Windermere**-based Tavistock successfully went after the UCF medical school in 2005 and Burnham in 2006, donating Lake Nona sites for both facilities.

### **'Just amazing'**

Backers of the medical city say turning pastures into a series of prodigious research facilities in just a few years is a rare feat.

"I think, if you really talk to people in the development business, the amount we've been able to accomplish is just amazing," Zboril said. "This is a long-term project that's going to pay dividends for years to come."

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