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FOR LEASE: Downtown Austin 'Boulder' — Hospital Included

By SYEDA HASAN • APR 12, 2017

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Builders came across a giant rock during construction at Brackenridge Hospital a few decades ago.

MARTIN DO NASCIMENTO / KUT

Next month, Austin's Brackenridge Hospital will close its doors for good. Patients will be transferred to the new [Dell Seton Medical Center](#) just across East 15th Street. That means the spacious, and centrally located, Brackenridge campus will be open for new development. But the incoming tenant will have to contend with a unique feature of the property, something buried beneath the surface of the old hospital.

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KUT's Oyeda Hasan reports

The rock room has long been an urban legend for hospital staff, and with new development on the horizon, its story has resurfaced. Juan Garza, vice president of finance and development at Central Health, which is leasing the property, confirmed that there is a giant rock buried beneath one of the hospital buildings. Garza said builders came across the infamous rock a few decades ago, during construction of one of the south towers.

“It’s very unusual, but it really does exist,” he said. “When they began to build out the rest of it, they ran into some pretty tough rock. They needed to blast it. They had patients in the hospital, so they wound up just leaving the rock there.”

Today, the rock is housed in the basement of the hospital’s Clinical Education Center. But its fate is uncertain.

Brackenridge Hospital is set to close with the opening of the Dell Seton Medical Center on May 21.



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"On that day, every single patient that is at Brackenridge Hospital will have to be transported over to the new hospital," Garza said. "They'll have to be transported in ambulances."

After the space is vacated, Central Health will deconstruct several Brackenridge buildings and lease out much of the 14.3-acre campus. Garza said the agency is envisioning a

high-density, mixed-use development on the site, something that would include new housing, office space, retail and hotels, along with some health care facilities. He said Central Health has narrowed the field down to four candidates, and he doesn't think the boulder will pose a challenge for redevelopment.



Geologist Charles Woodruff says the rock is a piece of bedrock from the area, which he calls "Austin chalk."

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"It's not a problem by today's construction standards," he said. "It's a topic of conversation, but it will not impede construction."

Charles Woodruff, a consulting geologist who also works with the Bureau of Economic Geology, said a true boulder buried under Brackenridge would be a highly unusual geological feature for the region. Technically, a boulder implies that the rock has traveled from elsewhere. After taking a look at the rock in person, Woodruff concluded that it was in fact a large, protruding piece of bedrock, which is part of the area's natural geological makeup.

"I can tell what we have here is basically an outcrop of Austin chalk," Woodruff said. "That's what our bedrock is in this area."

Still, Woodruff said it's rare for an outcropping of this size to be preserved during construction. While bedrock may not be as exciting as a giant boulder, Woodruff said, structurally

speaking, this is good news. He said the bedrock that makes up much of Central Austin provides a solid foundation for construction.

"It's what the big buildings are built on," he said. "It's what the University of Texas is built on."

The Brackenridge basement offers a rare glimpse at something that usually lies beneath the city surface. Carl McQueary is the defacto historian for the Texas Ministry Market with the Seton Family of Hospitals. He said though the rock has been officially stripped of its "boulder" title, that doesn't change much in terms of its significance.

"We're kind of protective of our rock, so rather than calling it a giant outcropping of Austin bedrock chalk, we're just going to keep calling it the rock," he said.

But McQueary has accepted the fact that the rock room faces an uncertain future. It is sitting on prime real estate, after all. "Of course, with parking being like it is in Austin, I expect that everything will be excavated to the nth degree for whatever building happens to live here," he said, "so I expect the rock



may not be in its present form for very much longer." In the coming weeks, Brackenridge staff will make their final visits to the rock room. As for the future of the rock, potential buyers will just have to roll with it.

Carl McQueary says he worries the rock could be excavated as the Brackenridge site is redeveloped.

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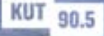
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