

How Dallas licked partisan politics and regional rivalries to land a coveted biotech hub

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By most metrics, Dallas was the underdog in the battle over the Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health.

The city doesn't have the legacy of a biotech giant like Boston or San Francisco. It doesn't crack the top 13 life sciences markets, which includes neighboring Houston, according to PitchBook. It's in a conservative state that the Biden Administration would seemingly want to avoid.

But Dallas, along with a coalition of Texas' biggest cities, lobbied for the biotech research agency's headquarters for more than two years in private meetings and public declarations, ignoring any concerns from outsiders about the region's chances.

Everything's bigger in Texas, including confidence, and on a relatively subdued Zoom call Tuesday, the state's diligence paid off ten-fold. ARPA-H will call Dallas home, alongside hubs in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the Washington, D.C., area.

Watching alone from his Austin office, Wayne Roberts knew the win would be one of the crowning achievements of his career. The CEO of the Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas trekked across the state and the country to persuade politicians, universities and entire cities to back a bid for the new agency.

Roberts and the statewide team brought a blue administration's brainchild to a red state known for its evocative politics. They got four major cities to put aside competition and present Texas as one. Though the headquarters will be physically located at Dallas' Pegasus Park, the hub is a consortium of Austin, Houston and San Antonio.

Texas has battled for years to be mentioned with coastal biotech elites. Biomedical degrees issued by D-FW area universities and colleges jumped nearly 34% between 2016 and 2021 while the life sciences labor pool increased 17% since 2019, according to research by real estate firm CBRE.

But it's housing ARPA-H, a \$2.5 billion undertaking that will engage researchers from every corner of the country, that may finally establish Dallas among the top tier of life science research centers, bringing an influx of talent and federal funding.

"This is a real coup for the state of Texas," Roberts said. "It really is."

'We wanted it in Texas'

Tracey Davies stood in the doorway of Roberts' office in the spring of 2021.

"Are you aware of this ARPA-H proposal?" asked Davies, then the chief strategic initiatives and intellectual property officer at the Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas. "This is a really cool idea."

Roberts, like Davies, had listened to President Joe Biden's address before the Joint Session of Congress a few days prior. The president briefly proposed a new federal agency modeled after the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, which led to the development of the internet, except this one would focus on medical research.

"Well, is anyone in Texas trying to go for it and get it here?" Davies asked.

It made perfect sense to Davies that a health agency whose research could impact every American would want to come to Texas. More than 30 million people call the state home. Houston is one of the most racially diverse cities in the country. Texas dedicated \$6 billion to the Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas, making it the second-largest cancer research and prevention program in the world.

Roberts agreed: Why wouldn't ARPA-H be interested in the Lone Star

State?

He made some phone calls. He rang Texas A&M University, which had secured a federal bio-manufacturing center about a decade prior. He connected with Thomas Graham, founder of Austin-based Crosswind Media and Public Relations, who was instrumental in getting the center to College Station.

Roberts called the University of Texas System. Casual conversations between Roberts, Davies, Graham and Mark Moreno, vice president for governmental relations at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, turned into Zoom calls every Wednesday at 7:30 a.m. before the group had to go to their day jobs. Each week, the meeting grew in size.

There was no starting line, let alone a finish line, when the patchwork team of advocates began racing toward ARPA-H. The agency released no instructions on how it would pick a headquarters. It didn't even have a director.

The crew knew they would have to overcome hurdles not present in other parts of the country, so they hit the ground running. They named themselves the Coalition for Health Advancement and Research in Texas, or CHART, and leveraged the connections of each participant. Officials at MD Anderson helped get a meeting with the Biden Administration.

Rather than selecting one location to pitch as ARPA-H's future hub, CHART presented a choose-your-own-adventure booklet featuring the pros of Austin, Dallas, Houston and San Antonio, as well as sign-offs from the mayor of each city. The bid included details of major airports and already-constructed buildings, like Pegasus Park.

"I think it was well known among the institutions of higher ed that I don't

play favorites. I love all my children equally," Roberts said. "And I didn't care if it went to Houston or Dallas or to Dime Box. We wanted it in Texas."

Bipartisan biotech

The hardest part of organizing Texas' bid wasn't getting Texans from across the aisle on the same page, Davies said.

The hardest part was combating questions about why the Biden administration would want to give a win to a conservative state that the president lost in the last election.

"It was having to spend so much time talking about what I thought were the questions that should not influence where this agency should go," Davies said.

Despite initial concerns about political snags, Davies and her team were never told "no." White House officials, lawmakers and other decision-makers didn't immediately shut down the idea of Texas hosting the agency.

Securing meetings with so many leaders was a feat, one Roberts and Graham largely chalked up to the help of Dallas-based Lyda Hill Philanthropies. The organization, a major funder of life science research, connected the team with a Washington law firm that set up meetings with members of Congress.

Lyda Hill received the Carnegie Medal of Philanthropy last year for her contributions to science.

Texas politicians threw their support behind the plan.

"Having bipartisan Texas delegation engagement very early on... that's really critical," Graham said. "Once it gets rolling, anyone can champion it. But early on, it takes somebody to just get a word inserted."

The final leg of the race

The [selection process](#) was formalized once ARPA-H selected its director, Renee Wegrzyn. Rather than one headquarters, the agency would adopt a "hub and spoke" model with three main hubs and hundreds of partner locations.

Washington, D.C., would get one of the hubs focused on partnerships and stakeholders, Wegrzyn announced in March. The customer experience and investor catalyst hubs were up for grabs; the Texas team zeroed in on customer experience because of the state's diverse patient populations.

The agency laid out three phases: A round of white paper pitches, a round of site visits and a final round where the winners would be selected.

ARPA-H said it won't reveal which cities or states bid for the agency, but North Carolina, Massachusetts, California, Philadelphia and Georgia each said they would. The Texas team knew the competition would be stiff.

For the first time since Texas decided to pitch for the biotech hub, cities in the state submitted bids separately. Houston and Dallas moved on to the round of site visits and Austin and San Antonio signed onto the Dallas application.

"What the interest was, and continued to be, was to get it to Texas. And if that meant it was in Houston, fine. If that meant it was in Dallas, fine,"

Davies said. "The two separate applications were a way of highlighting the strengths of both of these places."

The Houston consortium, led by the Texas Medical Center, was eliminated after in-person visits.

Tom Luce, director of biotech initiatives at Lyda Hill Philanthropies, said he was disappointed Houston applied separately. Houston rejoined the Dallas consortium for phase three.

"We certainly welcome them back," Luce said. "They have a lot to offer."

Bill McKeon, president and CEO of Texas Medical Center, said Houston looks forward to supporting Dallas and the agency in its goals.

"It is an incredible validation of the important role that Texas plays as a leader in innovation, [life sciences](#) and the future of medicine that Dallas was selected as an ARPA-H consumer hub," McKeon said.

What started as only a handful of determined science advocates grew to a team of hundreds of people spanning locations, industries and ideologies. After submitting the final application this summer, and for the first time in two years, the group sat back and waited. There was nothing left to do.

Validating years of work

Roberts sat in a lounge chair in his den watching the Houston Astros a few days before the official announcement when he got the call from Tom Luce. ARPA-H was coming to Texas.

Elated but sworn to secrecy until Sept. 26, Roberts told only the essential

players who had been part of the team since the beginning. That included Davies, who has since left government work.

Things are about to change for Texas. Roberts can feel it.

ARPA-H won't immediately bring an influx of money or jobs, other than an unspecified number of project managers who will come work at Dallas' Pegasus Park. But the potential benefits are obvious, said Samuel Achilefu, chair of UT Southwestern's Department of Biomedical Engineering.

"It validates all the efforts made by a lot of people here in Dallas to focus on biotechnology health care solutions," Achilefu said.

On the same day as the site selection announcement, ARPA-H awarded \$45 million to a team led by cancer researchers at Houston's Rice University.

San Antonio said the agency's presence will create opportunities for the city that's home to the largest military medical complex in the country.

"Increasing our visibility will cause businesses to move here, spend their dollars here," said Heather Hanson, president of the nonprofit BioMedSA, which was heavily involved in getting ARPA-H.

ARPA-H's footprint in Texas will largely be organized by the consortium management firm Advanced Technology International. Roberts will continue his work at the Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas. The team at Lyda Hill Philanthropies flew to Boston for another project hours after Dallas was officially selected.

The two years of early-morning meetings and hours of work will bind those responsible for landing ARPA-H forever.

"Look what happens when people come and work together," Davies said. "I think if you had told anyone else in mid-2021 that Texas is likely to be a hub for this new Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health, given everything, people would not have been inclined to bet on it. And so it felt good."

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