

## [Austin's megasites on display](#)

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### **Body**

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Hutto leaders first assembled 1,400 acres for its megasite with the goal of landing a "big fish." But when companies like Tesla Inc., Amazon.com Inc. and Applied Materials Inc. passed on the boomtown near Austin within the last decade, they instead divvied up pieces of the site for speculative industrial and commercial developers to meet the demand of the market.

But now, the pendulum has shifted back. Huge economic development projects - like Jeff Bezos' [Blue Origin Enerprises LP](#) and Elon Musk's [Terafab](#) - are once again scouring the region for space like they did within the last decade. Areas with an assemblage of hundreds of acres of shovel-ready space stand to be a step ahead.

"I'm like, well gosh darn it, where were you three years ago?" Hutto Economic Development Director Cheney Gamboa said.

Click on the map pins for information about each megasite

It's a sentiment that is representative of not only the region but the whole country.

While there is no formal database on megasites, it's well understood within the site selector and brokerage community that the number of them nationwide is "dwindling," according to Christopher D. Lloyd, senior vice president and director of infrastructure and economic development at Virginia-based McGuireWoods Consulting.

Communities and developers in the mid-2010s last started moving to identify sites, entitle them and install infrastructure to get them ready around 2020. That helped buoy a manufacturing influx spurred by the pandemic, supply chain boondoggles and geopolitical tensions, and aided by two presidencies that promoted on-shoring and passed legislation like the CHIPS and Science Act to encourage projects to move forward.

Now, thanks to that manufacturing boom and the [subsequent data center explosion](#), remaining megasites are "few and far between," Lloyd said. Communities that start working now to "restock the pantry" will be first in line to land more jobs and economic development, he said, adding that many cities in the Austin area have the chance to be at the forefront.

"Companies don't want to wait. When they make the decision that they need to take advantage of a market opportunity, they don't have the 3-to-5 years to get the entitlements, to get the utilities there - they want to go. So having sites that are ready, megasites in the Austin region help give it a competitive edge over those communities that don't have those kind of assets," said Lloyd, who is the former chairman of the Site Selectors Guild.

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There is no set definition of a "megasite," but it's usually viewed as a shovel-ready parcel of land well into the hundreds of acres. They have utility access and are close enough to urban centers that they have access to workforce. Many have multi-modal transportation options, at-minimum to thoroughfares, but also sometimes to rail and air.

The most-prominent ones in the area include the megasite in Hutto, the adjacent RCR Taylor Logistics Park in Taylor, another near Lockhart, the [TriTexas Logistics Park](#) in San Marcos and one at the [former Alcoa Corp. site near Rockdale](#).

Those have been used in the past to pitch some of the aforementioned companies and others like [Micron Technology Inc.](#) and Toyota Motor Corp. One of the those, TriTexas, is wholly available. But the others have to varying degrees been eaten up by [Samsung Electronics Co. Ltd. and Tesla Inc. suppliers](#), [speculative developers](#), [data centers](#) and [solar cell battery factories](#). Many in the community maintain they remain the subject of much interest.

That's bad news for Austin if it wants to continue to land the country's biggest projects, experts said. Industrial users in general require a lot of space for manufacturing, warehousing and logistics, and storage. They also want a site with a buffer to nearby schools, parks and homes. And they always want to have more space on hand for future expansion.

Having those ready to go is "what makes these megasites so essential," said Davis Bass, an Austin-based partner at HPI Real Estate Services and Investments. It helped land whales like [Samsung in Taylor](#), [Tesla in eastern Travis County](#), and [Elon Musk's growing empire in Bastrop County](#) - even if they were not directly in any of the aforementioned megasites but were greenfield sites with utility access and proximity to Austin.

Bass said because these sites are so big, companies are able to get economies of scale on utilities, like on-site substations or water and sewer infrastructure. It also allows for flexibility, like if a company wants to have space for testing or [industrial outdoor storage](#). Those are not typically available in a normal industrial park.

"If we don't have these megasites in the works, I think some of these bigger national projects, it's going to make it more difficult for them to consider here. It just won't come across their radar," said Bass, saying that these projects often end up being "generational" in terms of impact. "If we want to continue to stay at the forefront of advanced manufacturing, we need chips on the board, and those sites help us do that."

Cody Poteat admitted the near-decade working to make the [765-acre RCR Taylor Logistics Park](#) attractive for companies has taken a "lot of effort."

There were the sheer upfront costs of developing a rail-served asset in terms of land, infrastructure and railroad tracks. They navigated the development processes in a city like Taylor that is grappling with a huge influx spurred by Samsung's large investment. They juggled working with developers and operating their own auto ramp and materials handling business. All while educating the market about a "new toy" in the form a rail-served industrial park.

"We're teaching the market as they go on how they can benefit from rail, which is a big change. When you start talking supply chains, you're talking about tried-and-true this is how we do things. Opening that up, showing them the better mouse trap, it just takes a lot of time," said Poteat, the vice president of RCR Rail Co., which oversees the park along U.S. Highway 79.

Nonetheless, RCR is approaching full build out. A slew of Samsung suppliers have purchased land in the park led by South Korean chemical supplier Soulbrain Holdings Co. Ltd., [which is working on a \\$600 million phosphoric acid plant](#). Houston-based Partners Real Estate built two massive speculative industrial buildings that were wholly leased by Tesla and [Taiwanese electronics maker Compal Electronics Inc.](#) Tesla uses the auto-ramp to move its vehicles made its in Travis County factory.

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The park has about 200 acres left. That includes 100 acres of rail-served land and 15 acres of non-rail served that is available for purchase. They are keeping about 90 acres within the park for leases.

"I think it just kind of means we hit it on the head, in terms of location and in terms of where this industrial development needs to flow," Poteat said.

Poteat said that interest has picked up to start the year. He said that's due to the site's speed-to-market and rail availability, but also macroeconomic factors like tariffs, near-shoring, interest rates and Texas' business-friendly reputation. But he's not ready to commit to needing another megasite - and if one is built in the region, he said it won't be from his team.

"I think there's enough good product out there - or the next step below good product - that could get gobbled before they start building more of these," he said. "That being said the rate of growth and rate of interest what it is, that's where the entrepreneurial spirit comes out. Someone has to get to put the shovel in the ground first and pursue the build it and they will come mentality."

Next door to RCR, the Hutto megasite consists of 450 acres owned by the Hutto Economic Development Corp. and privately owned land they had options on. Right now, only about 145 acres of the former is available for industrial users that is not under contract. They also have another 60 acres along frontage roads that is intended to be earmarked for mixed-use retail.

Gamboa, of the city of Hutto, said the city's priority is to do what's right to benefit the community. That means finding the right mix of users in the megasite, along with other areas of land owned by the EDC like the [Cottonwood Tract](#), which are more ideal for commercial.

"I think the biggest challenge in economic development is the absence of a crystal ball. It would be great if we knew, 'Just hold on another six months there's a huge project coming,' but you have to respond to the priorities of your board and city council as well," she said. "As those start to shift, then we align our resources and efforts accordingly. They want to see this land developed and put to good use and so we're not going after the big huge projects at this point."

One thing she said is "impactful" is the fact the EDC owns the land. It helps them control growth in a way that can otherwise be hard in Texas. She said building trust with the community is how you approach private landowners in the future to help with big opportunities in the future.

"We hear all the time the upset from residents from community members about this use or that use is coming and we have enough of that and that shouldn't go there because this use doesn't go well with the residential next door. Well we can't control that because we don't control the land. If it's zoned for that use, then that's kind-of it. But when we do own the land, we can influence, we can say this is what we're trying to achieve, this is the highest and best use, this is the goal," she said.

Still, the need for large shovel-ready site remains at a critical point as interest from companies in the region continues to remain high - [and is getting larger](#).

Jones Lang LaSalle Managing Director Zane Cole, who is helping market the 33,000-acre former Alcoa megasite, said the region has a constant stream of interest in the bigger sites from various industries. While some need rail access or proximity to workforce, power is the biggest requirement outside of potential economic incentives. That makes megasites so important.

"Usually we're competing with other states on those megasites, but I think we've got state and local government and the surrounding regions that are all very motivated and all on the same page in terms of trying to attract these large users to these sites," he said.

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That being said, he doesn't think Austin will be at a disadvantage without them as "it's still Austin" and "people are still attracted to Austin." The aforementioned pros and existing buildings are a selling point. Plus the region is still growing - and growing outwards to area like Temple that are on companies' radars.

"I think that Austin in general sits well with attracting those types of larger users and obviously the megasites that are out there are going to be considered on those larger requirements," Cole said. "Could we use more? If there are sites that can produce power and infrastructure, they're going to show well because Austin is still attractive (in terms of) higher education, engineering, those types of workers. Austin in general lends itself well to that type of use."

Others continued to sound the alarm.

"I would love to see Texas have some more, and I'd love to see the U.S. and whatnot have more of these in general, because I think they're important for the next wave for what we're looking to do here at home," said Bass of HPI, who added that they're also ideal for data centers amid a nationwide push for those.

He said finding sites that check off all the boxes in terms of road infrastructure, utilities access and proximity to urban population and labor is hard to do.

"It seems so simple in a state like Texas well let's go reserve 1,200 acres somewhere. But like - no offense to these places that are beautiful - but you can't go do it in West Texas. It's not just about the land size," he said.

Lloyd, the site selector, said Austin nationally maintains a reputation as a place that people want to go and do business. But there are remaining concerns about cost of living, especially for manufacturing jobs, and transportation infrastructure - all "questions that come with any community that is growing rapidly."

But megasites help alleviate some of that in the eyes of a company looking for a space. He said communities need to start deciding now if they want to compete for the larger projects or be satisfied with the smaller ones. And if it's the former - "start the planning now," he said.

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