

Better than CSI? New crime lab touted, but county and city rift hangs over \$7 million wonder

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Inside an industrial space that once housed a cookie factory, Harris County officials ceremoniously broke ground Tuesday on what they hope will become one of the nation's top forensic laboratories when it opens in the fall.



Photo by Tyler Rudick
Harris County chief medical examiner Dr. Luis A. Sanchez poses inside the future forensics laboratory.

Along Holcombe in the Texas Medical Center's historic [John P. McGovern Building](#), a long 16,000-square-foot space — originally built in the late 1940s as a rail depot for Nabisco supplies — will be converted by [Vaughn Construction](#) and designers [Johnston, LLC](#) into a state-of-the-art genetics laboratory for a 40-person team of DNA analysts and crime scene specialists within the [Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences \(HCFIS\)](#).

"There is no doubt that this build out is critical," county chief medical examiner [Dr. Luis A. Sanchez](#) said during the ceremony. "The HCIFS Forensic Genetics Laboratory is one of the busiest in the nation, analyzing more than 3,000 cases a year. With a turnaround time of only 60 days and no backlog of untested cases, our track record is unparalleled in the State of Texas."

"What you see on TV won't hold a candle to what they're going to be able to do at the institute in the near future," laughed Harris County district attorney Pat Lykos.

Dubbed the Regional Forensic Genetics Laboratory, the new facility will concentrate primarily on the forensic subsets gene analysis and [serology](#), the study of bodily fluids.

"We contributed \$2 million of our [forfeiture](#) money to equip the new lab, so they'll have very advanced tools," Harris County district attorney Pat Lykos told CultureMap after the groundbreaking. "They're even going to have robotics."

In total, the county is spending \$7 million to see the DNA lab fully built.

The Institute of Forensic Sciences already works with more than 100 area law-enforcement agencies, Lykos said, and as the county continues to grow in population, forensics efforts will need to expand.

Earlier this year, the county Commissioners Court approved plans to construct a new nine-story regional crime lab within the Texas Medical Center, slated for completion in 2015. "What you see on TV won't hold a candle to what they're going to be able to do at the institute in the near future," Lykos laughed.



Photo by Tyler Rudick
County officials select their honorary hard hats and shovels.

But the ongoing political drama over who will oversee Houston area forensics, the city or the country, loomed behind Tuesday's groundbreaking. Mayor Annise Parker, who is **pushing** for an independent crime lab run by an approved board, was not in attendance.

Parker wants the city's troubled crime lab — which has faced multiple controversies for mismanaged evidence and thousands of **untested rape kits** — to be removed from the Houston Police Department. Harris County wants the medical examiner rather than an independent board to be in charge though.

If Harris County and city officials cannot come to an agreement a second new crime lab could end up getting built by the city for an equally high cost.

Original Article:

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