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Rice-Baylor merger could be done by January

 By **TODD ACKERMAN** Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle
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Negotiations to merge Rice University and Baylor College of Medicine are proceeding fruitfully and could be successfully wrapped up by January, the institutions' leaders said today.

In a joint statement that marks the first substantive public comments on the confidential talks in nearly a year, Rice President David Leebron and Baylor interim President David Butler said they are working through "the myriad issues such a complex proposition raises" and learning "there's much to commend a merger."

"We are pleased to report that substantive progress has been made, enough so that our respective boards have authorized us to

extend the (negotiation contract) to Jan. 31, 2010," says the statement. "We will work hard to bring our discussions to a successful conclusion over the next four months."

The statement adds that the schools have agreed on many organizational and governmental issues and that they are "exploring multiple sources of funding to help the merger achieve its full potential" and are in discussions with several parties about becoming Baylor's primary private adult teaching hospital.

The two schools have been in serious merger talks for about a year. Six months ago, they signed a memorandum of understanding outlining the broad framework that will guide the formation of a formal contract. There had been little information out of that process before today.

A merger is seen as a potential boon to the city because it could create an academic powerhouse, the state's top private university paired with one of the country's best medical schools. It would bring Rice reputational enhancement and Baylor financial security.

Baylor, one of only 10 free-standing medical schools in the country, has struggled financially since splitting in 2004 with the Methodist Hospital. The past year, it has been attempting to overcome significant debt that threatens the deal.

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