

The Crimson White

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UA outlines options for Bryce

by [Jessica Colburn](#)

Almost from the start, there has been a relationship between the University of Alabama and Bryce Hospital, said Alabama Department of Mental Health Historian Steve Davis.

“The bricks that built Manly Hall and Clark Hall were made at Bryce,” Davis said. “UA bought all its coal from Bryce.”

And now, the University has bought Bryce Hospital.

University Planner and Designer Dan Wolfe said the University purchased the property last year.

“It’s a 160-acre site,” Wolfe said. “They’ve eyed that for many, many years.”

Students will benefit because it will relieve the congestion on the main campus, Wolfe said.

“From UA’s standpoint we’re very excited to have the property,” Wolfe said. “It really completes the campus. It’s almost like there was a piece of the puzzle missing.”

The University has had meetings with interest groups, the city and the Student Government Association. It also had open forums to discuss its plans for the property, Wolfe said.

Stacy Browning, planner for the historic districts of Tuscaloosa, confirmed the University’s meetings with the city.

“I personally would like to see it preserved as much as possible,” Browning said.

“We’re not trying to over-develop it,” Wolfe said. “Right now our designs are just concepts.”

These concepts include additional academic buildings, parking, dorms, a second quad, and a possible performing arts center. UA will also preserve the dome building and some of the wings, Wolfe said.

“It’s been a win-win,” Davis said. “We can now move into a modern building and UA can increase its land size by one-third.”

The concepts also include a possible repurposing of the main building as a visitor’s center and museum featuring Bryce Hospital and the University’s history, Wolfe said.

“The idea of a museum of how we treat people with mental illness has been my goal since I took this job,” Davis said. “They’ve really listened to students and professionals...They have really done a great job.”

Dr. Rufus Partlow remembers growing up on the grounds of Bryce Hospital as an 8-year-old child in 1938.

“There were no kids except me and one girl, Emily,” Partlow said. “We pretty well did what we wanted to.”

Partlow’s father was an assistant physician and interned at Bryce Hospital. He raised his family on the grounds of Bryce Hospital until Partlow was 14 years old.

“I remember chasing a kite through the plowed corn field behind my house,” Partlow said. “There used to be a peach orchard directly across from where DCH Regional Medical Center is now.”

The amount of Tuscaloosa citizens that have never been through the gates of Bryce is amazing, Partlow said.

“It’s hard for me to believe [after] being raised here,” Partlow said. “This is my home.”

Besides Partlow’s family, other physicians and their families lived on Bryce’s grounds, along with the patients.

“It was a community back then,” Partlow said. “It was a self-sustaining establishment, too.”

Eligible patients were allowed to work on the grounds of Bryce, promoting Dr. Peter Bryce’s patient treatment philosophy, said Alabama Department of Mental Health Historian Steve Davis.

“He was way ahead of his time,” Davis said. “He believed in community involvement of treatment. He really treated patients like they were ill and not criminals.”

One of the first cheerleaders at the University was a patient of Bryce, Davis said.

“He used to drill the cadets,” Davis said. “When he died, more than 100 cadets came to his funeral.”

With the change in ownership, Partlow said he was worried the University would destroy the identity of the property.

“I really thought that they would tear down the wings and the main building when they first bought the property,” Partlow said. “I encourage students to write the board of trustees about what they think about the plans.”

The art school and the music school have both looked into having buildings on the grounds of Bryce, Wolfe said.

“I think these buildings are just made for an artist,” Partlow said. “I want them to know.”

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