

Bryce could be part of state's land-sale plan

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MONTGOMERY | In addition to plans to sell off 5,763 acres of state prison land, Gov. Bob Riley also proposed on Wednesday selling Bryce Hospital property to raise money for state agencies.

The property in Tuscaloosa is owned by the Department of Mental Health and Retardation. The University of Alabama has indicated its interest in the site, which is adjacent to the UA campus.

"Bryce is a perfect example of land that potentially would be of greater and more efficient use and more profitable if it was sold," Riley said after a news conference announcing he was putting prison acreage on the market.

Mental Health and Retardation department spokesman John Ziegler said Bryce patient and employee needs would be considered first before any land deals are considered.

Bryce Hospital has about 350 patients and about 1,000 employees.

"The people we serve need to be served and we need employees to serve those people, and whether that happens in a particular location or a few miles away, those services are greatly needed," Ziegler said.

Ziegler said the department has been looking at the best uses for its property and has been considering a University of Alabama proposal to buy part or all of the 209 acres of Bryce property adjacent to the campus.

He said no decision has been made.

University officials couldn't be reached for comment Wednesday.

"The department's focus is the development of a long-term statewide plan for systems transformation and modernization," Ziegler said. "If the relocation of the hospital fits into an overall systems transformation plan, we would gladly consider it."

He said that the agency hasn't determined how much the property is worth.

The Bryce property contains a geriatric center, a nursing home and an adolescent center in addition to a community mental health center.

In 1971, Bryce had nearly 5,000 patients. The hospital dramatically lowered its population after the country moved toward more community-based treatment.

Because no decision has been made, there's no way to speculate what will happen to employees and patients, Ziegler said.

"We've not gotten that far," he said. "We want to be consumer and family driven rather than department driven."

The Bryce property surrounds the original state mental hospital, which opened in 1861 and is listed on the National Registry of Historic Places, although much of the building is unused.

Selling mental health property isn't a new concept. The department recently consolidated several facilities and their functions and put properties up for sale.

Ziegler said the department just sold the Daphne Bayside facility in Baldwin County for \$4.2 million to a consortium of regional health-care providers in south Alabama.

There is also commercial property potential at the Albert P. Brewer Center in Mobile, which the department plans to lease to generate department revenue, he said.

Also a meeting was recently held with public officials in Decatur concerning the Lurleen B. Wallace Development Center.

"We want to recruit some type of business and industry and some institution that can use that property also to generate revenue for [the] department and the people we serve," Ziegler said.