

University's \$60M bid for Bryce turned down

By Lydia Seabol Avant Staff Writer

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TUSCALOOSA | The University of Alabama has offered \$60 million to purchase the Bryce Hospital campus, but the board of trustees for the Alabama Department of Mental Health on Thursday made a recommendation not to accept it.

Now the state plans to explore options to replace Bryce, including possibly renovating the former Carraway Medical Center in Birmingham and moving Bryce clients there.

"There are 650 employees at Bryce — that would be very attractive to Jefferson County," said Gov. Bob Riley during a special called Department of Mental Health board meeting Thursday in Tuscaloosa.

The almost 175-acre Bryce property was appraised earlier this year at \$50 million. But there are soil contamination issues that would cost about \$4 million to \$5 million to address, said ex-mental health commissioner Kathy Sawyer. Sawyer was hired by Riley to gather facts and recommend options for the Bryce property and its clients.

This week, UA made an offer to the governor's office of \$50 million in cash for the Bryce property, plus \$3.5 million for contamination cleanup and \$6.5 million for the historical preservation of the main domed building on the Bryce campus. The main building would be used as a museum and office space for UA. No other buildings would likely be preserved, Sawyer said.

But according to a study by the state mental health department, it would cost \$65 million to build a new 268-bed, state-of-the-art hospital to replace Bryce, not including furnishings or equipment. UA's offer also does not address the cost of outplacing the care of about 100 Bryce clients into the community. That is unacceptable, said board member Paul Davis.

"They want 200 acres of the most pristine property in Tuscaloosa," Davis said. "I realize that the University of Alabama is a juggernaut in this state, but we have a priority to the mentally ill."

Davis suggested that the state sit on the property if UA cannot come up with a high enough amount.

"I resent the fact that we are supposed to just roll over and play dead when the university says, 'We want, we need, we take,'" Davis said.

UA President Robert Witt has said that the acquisition of the Bryce property is critical for UA's potential growth.

"I view the acquisition of Bryce as an investment in the future of the university," Witt said in September. "It is the largest piece of continuous property the university could acquire. In making this investment, we would be providing future generations the opportunity to explore options that would not be available on our current footprint."

For nearly four years, officials with UA and the mental health department have discussed the sale of the Bryce campus to UA.

In April, Sawyer released a preliminary report that argues for a \$84.2 million price tag for most of the Bryce campus.

The money would be enough to build a new, smaller hospital on the Partlow campus in Tuscaloosa and pay for moving about one-third of the clients to community facilities across the state. UA's offer of \$60 million falls \$24 million short of the amount Sawyer's study says the state needs.

The governor's office was recently approached by the owners of Carraway about purchasing its 600-bed facility, which has been closed. The facility is larger than DCH Regional Medical Center and would be considerably larger than the 268-bed hospital the Alabama Department of Mental Health wants to build, but it may be cheaper to renovate rather than build a new hospital, board members suggested.

Sawyer told the board that it's not known what the costs of developing and renovating Carraway would be. The governor suggested that the board visit Carraway and explore that option.

Moving Bryce out of Tuscaloosa County would have a significant impact on the local economy, said State Rep. Chris England of Tuscaloosa, who attended Thursday's meeting. Before the board decides to move Bryce out of Tuscaloosa, England suggested it consider the situation of Bryce employees.

"I am very worried, because the loss of jobs would have a severe impact," England said after the meeting. "I am fairly certain [Tuscaloosa's leaders] would do what is necessary and required to keep the hospital and its employees in Tuscaloosa."



Tuscaloosa News / Dusty Compton
Alabama Gov. Bob Riley called a special meeting of the board of trustees of the Alabama Department of Mental Health at Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa on Thursday.

Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox, who was not notified of Thursday's Alabama Department of Mental Health board meeting and did not attend, said the state owes it to Tuscaloosa County to keep Bryce here.

"This community, for decades, has supported Bryce Hospital as we have seen the patient care go from 5,000 to 300-plus today," Maddox said. "It has been our community that has absorbed the impact of that. It would be a disservice to Tuscaloosa for the state to abandon us when we have given so much back to the mental health community."

Like England, Maddox said he would try to keep Bryce from moving to Jefferson County.

"I can assure you that the community leaders will rally around this issue to protect Bryce Hospital to ensure our mental health consumers have the best care possible, and we believe that can be done here in Tuscaloosa," Maddox said.

In addition to moving Bryce to Carraway, Riley suggested that the board explore the idea of privatizing care. That could result in considerable savings if the state contracted the construction and/or management of a new hospital out to a private company, Sawyer said.

The board of trustees voted unanimously to recommend that the current UA proposal be rejected while the state explores the options of privatizing Bryce and moving Bryce patients to Carraway Hospital.

No one from UA or local governments attended the meeting, which was not announced to the public.

Reach Lydia Seabol Avant at 205-722-0222 or lydia.seabol

avant@tuscaloosaneews.com.

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