

EDITORIAL

Bryce Hospital presents multiple UA opportunities

Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa presents an opportunity for The University of Alabama to expand its campus while advancing its educational purposes and preserving history.

The university needs land, and the state already owns Bryce's more than 200 acres, so acquiring it should be simpler than dealing with multiple private owners of smaller properties.

But the state Department of Mental Health and Bryce's advocates, including the Bryce Hospital Historical Preservation Committee, worry about preserving the main hospital building and a cemetery.

They'd like to see the building house a museum. They also want to make sure that sale of the hospital property brings in enough revenue to put its 300 or more patients into a new facility.

Dr. Tom Hobbs, committee chairman, gives several reasons the hospital is historically significant, not only in the state but also nationally:

- The building, constructed in 1861, is a pure example of T.S. Kirkbride's style of construction, which became the model for asylums throughout the United States in the late 19th century.
- Dr. Peter Bryce, the hospital's first superintendent, pioneered treatment based on compassion and respect, eliminating punitive patient management and coercive restraints.
- Bryce Hospital became underfunded, short-staffed and overcrowded in the mid-20th century. It was one of the targets of Wyatt v. Stickney, a landmark court case that fostered national minimum standards of mental health care.
- Bryce Hospital is widely regarded as the catalyst for the national movement to deinstitutionalize patients, placing them in small outpatient facilities in their home communities.

Thus, the hospital represents some of the best and the worst of mental health treatment history, as well significant reforms. Buying the property, preserving the building and using part of it as a museum would fit right into the educational role of the university, while giving the university more space.

The university and the Mental Health Department should work out a deal that serves the purposes of both — and of the taxpayers who fund them both.

