

UA still researches possible Bryce buy

By Adam Jones Staff Writer

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TUSCALOOSA | Despite the expectation that the University of Alabama would have a response by now, UA administrators have yet to say whether they think buying the Bryce Hospital campus is feasible under conditions proposed by mental health officials.

UA's delay is not expected to derail the potential sale, which Gov. Bob Riley wants done before he leaves office in early 2011.

"We were anticipating a response in early July, but have not yet received [it,]" said Kathy Sawyer, former mental health commissioner tapped by Riley to gather facts and recommend options for Bryce, in an e-mail.

"At this time, we are not in a time crunch that would prevent a deal from being finalized during Governor Riley's term," she said. "We hope to hear from the university soon, after which time we will explore options."

Sawyer said she had expected to hear from university administrators in early July, a timeframe UA President Robert Witt mentioned in an interview in mid-June.

In response to a request for information about whether the university had reached a decision, UA spokeswoman Cathy Andreen replied by e-mail.

"The university continues to gather and analyze information," the e-mail read. "We anticipate our due diligence work will be completed in the relatively near future."

Officials with UA and the mental health department have been talking about transferring the Bryce campus for nearly four years. Sawyer was hired by the governor in late December to speed the process in hopes of reaching a deal before Riley leaves office.

In April, Sawyer released her preliminary report to the governor that provided a road map for selling the property to the university and justified the \$84.2 million asking price by the Department of Mental Health for most of the 188-acre campus.

The money would be enough to build a new, smaller hospital elsewhere in town and pay for the placement of about one-third of its patients in community facilities.

Sawyer also said in the report that a tentative agreement between the two public entities should be reached within 60 days. That date was about a month ago.

Administrators have several factors to mull over before deciding to buy the property. Under Sawyer's proposal, if UA bought the land, it would come as is. In other words, UA would take the expensive responsibility of preserving several historical but worn buildings and cleaning up groundwater pollution on the property.

Simply maintaining the Bryce campus, of which the vast majority is unused, costs the mental health department \$2.7 million annually, not including the tens of millions of dollars needed to renovate and restore the main domed building, which, under Sawyer's proposal, UA would agree to keep.

Cleanup of diesel fuel and chemicals from laundry dry cleaning — used when Bryce was a self-supported city — that has since seeped into the groundwater is expected to cost a minimum of \$300,000 annually. More likely, the actual cost to UA would be higher, since administrators want to restore the land for unrestricted use, unlike mental health officials who have no future plans for the contaminated portions, according to Sawyer's report.

The polluted groundwater has seeped onto 2 acres of UA's campus, and the more stringent cleanup UA wants is expected to cost between \$1.9 and \$2.5 million, according to Sawyer's report.

"There's no hold-up," said UA spokeswoman Debbie Lane in an e-mail response to a question about whether the cleanup or preservation issues were delaying the response from the university. "The university continues to gather and analyze information, and there's not a timeline or timeframe attached to our process."

Once a tentative agreement to sell the property is reached, Sawyer predicts it will take another six months to hammer out details of the final sale agreement, barring unforeseen obstacles, she said.

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