

UA seeks Bryce sale

By Anna Velasco -- The Birmingham News

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The University of Alabama is seeking the sale of Bryce Hospital, which is raising the possibility of old Carraway medical center in Birmingham as a site for relocation. (The Birmingham News /Tamika Moore)

The landlocked University of Alabama's need for expansion, not poor conditions for patients, is driving talk of relocating Bryce Hospital, Department of Mental Health officials say. Buildings that house about 340 mental health patients on Bryce's campus are in good condition, they say -- either built or renovated in recent years.

"We didn't put a 'for sale' sign out there," said David Jackson, associate commissioner for administration at the Alabama Department of Mental Health. "They approached us. Absent that happening, I don't think we'd be having this discussion."

But selling Bryce's 180-acre campus adjacent to the university is not a bad idea, mental health officials say. Maintenance and environmental cleanup of the grounds and historic structures cost the department more than \$4 million over the past two years, according to a report from March.

Construction on the original hospital started in 1853, and it opened in 1861. The four-story, white-columned structure in the Italianate style has an imposing white dome and three wings on each side that were used for patient rooms. Patients no longer stay there.

A smaller psychiatric hospital that promotes state-of-the-art treatment would be ideal, Jackson said. Setting up additional community services to allow more Bryce patients to receive care outside the hospital and close to home is a moral imperative, patient advocates say.

The sticking point is the price. The university's offer of \$50 million in cash falls significantly short of the \$84 million the department has said it needs to build a smaller replacement hospital and provide placement for about 100 Bryce patients in community programs.

Relocating Bryce to the now-closed Carraway medical center in Birmingham has emerged as a potentially less costly alternative to building a new hospital. But state officials tried last week, in two separate meetings, to reassure agitated Bryce employees and Tuscaloosa residents and politicians that keeping Bryce in Tuscaloosa remains the state's first choice. State officials say no decision has been made about Bryce's future.

Paul Davis, a longtime Department of Mental Health trustee who resigned from the board last month, said the University of Alabama is bullying the department. He said he favors putting the valuable property on the open market rather than take what he calls an unfairly low price.

"The idea of ever moving Bryce was because the university wants the land," Davis said. "We voted unanimously to sell the land provided the price was right. They're about \$20 million or so short, or about the cost of two skyboxes."

The university has been in discussions to buy the land for four years. Its most recent offer was for \$60 million -- \$50 million in cash and \$10 million pledged toward cleaning up contaminated land and performing some historical preservation of the original hospital building. Robert Witt, the university's president, has said that \$60 million is 20 percent above the property's appraised value.

University officials said they have not developed a plan for the Bryce property, but the land would allow the university to free up valuable space in the heart of the campus.

Deborah M. Lane, assistant vice president for university relations, also said UA is able to honor and preserve the historic site. "Facilities on the Bryce property continue to deteriorate, including some buildings of historic value that need to be protected," she said.

The goal of selling the Bryce campus has not been for one state entity to reap as much money as possible from another state entity, said Kathy Sawyer, a former Mental Health commissioner and consultant hired by the state to work on the issue. The hope is to find a way for the purchase to benefit both sides, she said. Sawyer said Gov. Bob Riley will not endorse a plan that doesn't accomplish that.

Carraway option

Since Carraway came up as a possible place to relocate Bryce in early October, Mental Health Commissioner John Houston has toured the former 617-bed hospital twice, and Riley, Sawyer and other officials have toured it once.

The real challenge with Carraway, they say, is its size. The property is much bigger than the department needs. The department wants to scale back its inpatient operation at Bryce and build a 268-bed hospital.

"Nobody has any intention of having a 600-bed psychiatric facility," Jackson said. "We're still committed to having as many people as appropriate cared for in their communities."

Jackson said the trend in new psychiatric hospitals is to have a single-story building that provides a less institutional feel and allows patients to have normal interactions such as at a campus barbershop, beauty parlor and store.

Mental health officials are awaiting a price and a proposal from the Dallas-based owners of the Carraway campus that would outline how the massive facility could be retrofitted to provide a similar therapeutic setting.

Tuscaloosa officials and residents packed a public forum last week to express their concern over a possible relocation of Bryce to Birmingham. State officials assured them their hope is to be able to relocate Bryce, which employs 650 people, in Tuscaloosa, but they said they have to explore all viable options.

The department planned as its first-choice building a new psychiatric hospital on other land it owns in Tuscaloosa, near the Bryce campus. But that plan has a price tag of \$84 million.

Ellen B. Gillespie, executive director of the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program, said the planned 268-bed hospital is still too big and would divert money from creating programs for patients to receive care outside a hospital. She believes far more than 100 of Bryce's patients could be cared for in their communities if the resources were available.

"The building is not as important as the treatment and whether or not the care is preparing them to get out into the community," Gillespie said. "People should not have to live in the hospital for the rest of their lives. That would be a terrible outcome."

Tuscaloosa's view

The mayor of Tuscaloosa disputes the belief that Bryce needs to be smaller, saying jails and the courts have been flooded with mental health patients since the move to get people out of mental hospitals.

The city of Tuscaloosa last month sued the Department of Mental Health to block a potential move of Bryce away from the city that has been its home for 148 years. Over those years, the city has provided incalculable services to Bryce and its patients, Mayor Walter Maddox said.

"I am hopeful that our leaders will realize that Tuscaloosa has earned the right to keep Bryce Hospital here," Maddox said.

Sawyer said Bryce is Tuscaloosa's to lose. While the Birmingham City Council passed a resolution supporting a move to Carraway, Tuscaloosa chose to sue rather than become a true partner, she said.

"The only thing I've heard is what we don't want, what we won't accept," Sawyer said. "I've yet to hear a solution, an offer of help."

