

Department of Mental Health rejects UA's Bryce offer

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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 won't accept it.

Instead, the board plans to explore options to replace Bryce, including renovating Carraway Hospital in Jefferson County and moving Bryce and its 650 jobs to Birmingham.

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

The almost 175-acre Bryce property was appraised earlier this year at \$50 million. But there are considerable soil contamination issues that would cost approximately \$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 Bryce.

This week, the University of Alabama made an offer to the governor's office to give \$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. No other buildings would be guaranteed to be preserved, Sawyer said.

But according to a study by the mental health department, it would cost \$65 million to build a new 268-bed state of the art hospital to replace Bryce.

The University of Alabama offer also does not address the cost of relocating the care for approximately 100 Bryce patients into the community. That is unacceptable, said boardmember Paul Davis.

"They want 200 acres of the most pristine property in Tuscaloosa," said Davis. "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 continued 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."

Officials with UA and the mental health department have discussed, for nearly four years, transferring the Bryce campus.

In April, Sawyer released a preliminary report that provides a road map for selling the property to the university and 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 patients to community facilities across the state.

UA's offer of \$60 million is \$24 million short of the amount the state needs, according to Sawyer's study.



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Alabama Governor Bob Riley called a special meeting of the board of trustees of the Alabama Department of Mental Health at Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa today.