

Bryce sale works out for everyone

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The agreement reached last week for the 188-acre Bryce Hospital campus is historic in its significance for mental health care in the state, for the aspirations of the University of Alabama and for securing Tuscaloosa's future, which is so closely intertwined with both.

Gov. Bob Riley tried to reassure advocates for Bryce, local political leaders and the editorial board of The Tuscaloosa News that everything would work out fine in the end if everyone would just relax and trust the process. That didn't stop the drama.

There were troubling signs that the complex deal might hit an impasse as UA administrators dug in their heels after sweetening their offer to \$60 million from an initial bid of \$40 million. The Department of Mental Health insisted it will cost at least \$84 million to restructure services: building a smaller, modern hospital and expanding community-based care.

The city of Tuscaloosa filed a lawsuit to block the sale of Bryce to UA, and local legislators threatened to introduce legislation that would effectively kill the deal. Meanwhile, Birmingham charged in as a white knight, offering incentives to move Bryce patients to a vacant hospital there.

We urged Riley to take a firmer hand in brokering a compromise, and he did just that. In a show of political acumen and strength, he reached out to state

Sen. Phil Poole, D-Moundville, with whom he has sometimes feuded over other issues. Poole, likewise, deserves credit for putting any grudges aside in order to work with Riley for the broad interests of his constituents. Riley and Poole emerge as stronger leaders.

Make no mistake; this deal can accomplish big things. It positions Alabama to again become a leader in mental health care, improving the quality of life for patients and better serving the communities where services are offered. It can help taxpayers because community-based care is cheaper, and the costs of maintaining Bryce have been skyrocketing. And UA benefits by gaining room to grow.

State officials announced the broad outlines of a plan, but there are important details to tie up.

Building a new hospital on the grounds of Partlow Developmental Center in Tuscaloosa is only part of the plan. Some patients now at Bryce will go there, but others who can live in a less restrictive environment will go to group homes scattered across the state. Money from this deal needs to go toward expanding those community-based services. That funding should be carefully monitored.

Let's not forget about the old Bryce hospital as we move forward with a new one. UA has carved out \$10 million in the purchase price for preservation and environmental clean-up. It may be years before UA begins expanding onto the Bryce land, but we hope to see no delay in preservation and clean-up.

The city of Tuscaloosa can show its good faith by dropping its lawsuit. We were never convinced this was the best course of action, but now the lawsuit sets an even worse tone.

The Bryce deal, with all the final details tied up neatly, will be a big piece of Riley's legacy and a sign he is not yet a lame duck as the state Legislature readies for a challenging session that begins in less than two weeks.

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