

UA shows interest in Bryce campus

Bryce Hospital once supported 5,000 patients, but today it houses only 340. Meanwhile, the University of Alabama wants to expand its campus, which is only separated from Bryce by a fence. Could a takeover be in the future?

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TUSCALOOSA | The University of Alabama and state officials have discussed the possibility of UA taking over some or all of the Bryce Hospital campus.

The Bryce campus, which is next door to the land-locked university, is about one-third the size of the university. Those involved said the discussions have been general. They would not give specifics of how much of the Bryce campus UA is interested in.

John Houston, commissioner of the Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, said in a statement that the discussions are part of a continual effort to improve patient care.

He has met with UA President Robert Witt on several occasions to talk about expanding their relationship to research and professional training, he said.

"We have also discussed the university's interest in the Bryce property," Houston said. "Plans for the best use of Bryce Hospital should not be considered apart from the needs of the entire mental health care system in the state.

"In the few discussions we have had with the university we are simply exploring possibilities, and it is premature to suggest any action or plan for the department to pursue."

Any decision made would be made through a timely, deliberative process, he said.

The 209-acre Bryce property includes the original mental hospital opened in 1861 and listed on the National Registry of Registry of Historic Places, although much of the expansive building is unused today.

UA and Bryce have been neighbors since 1852, when the Legislature established the Alabama Insane Hospital, and in the past few years the university has developed its campus to the fenced-in edge of the Bryce campus.

Since his arrival in March 2003, Witt has aggressively expanded UA's campus as part of his goal of increasing enrollment.

In an interview with The Tuscaloosa News in the fall of 2004, he said the Bryce land was a possible area of further expansion, but said there had been no formal discussions.

He declined to comment for this article, deferring to Janet Griffith, assistant vice president over university relations.

"The university has discussed its potential interest in the Bryce Hospital property at a very general and preliminary level," she said in a statement. "We share Houston's strong belief that any decision by the [mental health department] regarding the Bryce property must be determined solely by what is best for [the department's] many stakeholders."

The number of patients at Bryce has declined from a peak of nearly 5,000 in 1971 to 340 patients today because of an emphasis on community-based care rather than confinement in large state institutions.

Costly repairs

If the university were to take over the property, it could be handed the expensive responsibility of restoring the main building, though department spokesman John Ziegler said there is no current price tag on the cost or restoration.

Noted architect Samuel Sloan designed the white expansive hospital with a dome seen from campus through the long tree-lined drive leading from the gate.

The wings of the hospital are vacant, and, even from the outside, appear to be in disrepair.

"It's sort of mothballed until they can figure out what to do with it," said Robert Mellown, a UA professor who wrote a history of the building and campus in 1990.



Staff file photo

Bryce officials have applied to have the historic mental hospital designated as a national landmark.

The core houses offices for the hospital director, campus security, administrative support offices and meeting rooms, but no patients, Ziegler said.

"There are no plans to make any change whatsoever to this configuration," he said.

There is an application with the National Park Service to designate the building a National Historic Landmark, which could make it eligible for federal restoration money.

"It's one of the most important buildings in the state," said Robert Gamble, senior architectural historian with the Alabama Historical Commission. "When it was built, it and the Capitol were probably the largest buildings in the state."

National significance

Gamble and Mellown have worked on getting the national landmark designation, a step above the historical registry.

"That the registry protects a building from being demolished is unfortunately a false statement that everybody subscribes too," said Gene Ford, a UA architectural historian that worked to place Foster Auditorium on the national landmark list. "It just slows the process down."

If the owner of an historic registry building is an agency receiving federal money and wants to raze the structure, historians must document the building and essentially write its obituary before demolition, Ford said.

Ziegler said there has been no discussion of the national landmark designation for some time within the department, but neither the university nor the department indicated any plans to demolish the hospital.

The landmark application is reviewed at the federal level, but the process is slow, Gamble said.

Mellown and Gamble said the hospital is worthy of the stricter guidelines for landmark status because of its national significance.

It was the first hospital built according to physician Thomas Kirkbride's plan for how a mental campus should be designed, and was the model hospital in the reform movement of mental health treatment in the mid-19th century, Gamble said.

"It is the basis for over a hundred mental institutions built in the last half of the 19th century and early 20th century, not only in the United States, but also in Canada," Mellown said.

Changes in philosophy of how to treat mental patients led to the addition of multiple wards to house an ever-increasing population, but were demolished in the early 1990s, Mellown said.

The hospital was almost three times its current size, he said.

"It would make a very interesting building," Mellown said of the possibility of UA incorporating it into the campus. "I would hope the university would be able to use it for classrooms or studios because there's all kinds of unusually-shaped rooms."

The dome of the hospital was also woven into local history when the families of then-Commissioner Peter Bryce and then-UA President Landon Garland climbed into it to seek refuge and watch federal troops burn the university campus in April 1865.

Past land dealings

Besides that anecdote, not much is written of the relationship between Bryce and the university. Mrs. Bryce gave a well-attended annual picnic to students, according to the out-of-print "The History of the University of Alabama" by James Sellers and edited by W.S. Hoole.

But in the 1960s, the relationship was profitable for both when the two swapped land.

The Legislature chose the spot Bryce sits on because of its closeness to the Black Warrior River, a spring that supplied endless gallons of fresh water, a vast coal reserve underneath and good farmland.

Indeed, for much of its history, the Bryce campus was self-sustaining, with patients growing their own food and providing their own heat and water. It's not clear if patients mined the coal, Mellown said.

It wasn't until the 1960s that laws were passed making that sort of work illegal.

"The whole problem was that kind of institution couldn't exist today because it was so much like slave labor," Mellown said.

Suddenly, Bryce had more land than it could possibly use at the same time UA had built almost to the property line between the two campuses.

However, the university didn't have money to buy Bryce, so the two negotiated a swap. UA gave Bryce the Northington campus, a World War II hospital that is now the site of University Mall, and land near Birmingham in exchange for some of Bryce's property between Hackberry Lane and McFarland Boulevard.

UA almost doubled its size, and Bryce was able to sell its new land to face financial difficulties on the overcrowded campus, according to Mellown.

Today, the former Bryce land is home to fraternity houses, dorms, intramural fields and the buildings on Fifth Avenue such as the Student Recreation Center.

Campus today

Recent discussions between UA and the Department of Mental Health have not come from any directive from the governor, Legislature or the judicial system to improve mental health care, said department spokesman John Ziegler.

"It is part of our normal mission to constantly evaluate ways to improve services for our citizens," he said.

In 2003, facing budget cuts and declining populations, the department closed several state facilities and consolidated others.

Three mental retardation developmental centers were consolidated into Partlow Developmental Center, a 250-acre campus separate from Bryce off University Boulevard East.

The department also closed the Thomasville Rehabilitation Center for persons with mental illness, sending 60 individuals there to Searcy Hospital near Mobile, the only other state hospital that provides both short-term and extended psychiatric care.

The Bryce campus also has several other buildings.

The Harper Geriatric Center has 96 beds, and the Alice Kidd Nursing Home has 30 beds. Also, the Bryce Adolescent Unit and School has 20 beds.

Indian Rivers Community Mental Health and Mental Retardation Center operates a 30-bed intermediate care unit.

The Bryce campus has about 900 employees, Ziegler said.

But with several vacant buildings on campus, some areas are reminiscent of a ghost town, which should not be surprising considering the campus was once, basically, its own town.

Mellown has researched the main building and land for so long that he's heard numerous suggestions of what should be done with it.

"It's been studied so much, but you never know what people are going to do," he said.

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