

Mental health concerns call for leadership

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We have reached a leadership moment in the proposed transfer of the Bryce Hospital campus to the University of Alabama. It is an opportunity for Gov. Bob Riley to accomplish what has been discussed for decades and clearly is in the best interests of the people of Alabama.

Riley must balance competing proposals, consider the information from consultants and stakeholders, and then rally support for a clear vision that provides the necessary care for Alabama's mental health clients while securing land for UA's continued growth. At the same time, we must preserve the historic core of Bryce Hospital.

Six months ago, a consultant hired by Riley mapped out an \$84 million plan for the sale of Bryce Hospital that would replace it with a smaller, modern hospital and provide more community-based care for patients who don't need an institutional setting. The consultant, former state Mental Health Commissioner Kathy Sawyer, clearly was representing the interests of the state Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation.

Last week, at long last, UA made a counter-proposal of \$60 million that includes \$10 million for historic preservation and cleanup of soil contamination. It is a significant jump from UA's earlier suggestion of \$40 million.

The two sides are remarkably close.

So it was disappointing to hear the governor offer not leadership, but threats. Riley floated the suggestion of moving the 650 jobs at Bryce away from Tuscaloosa. The idea that the former Carraway Medical Center, north of Birmingham, could become the state's psychiatric hospital is a non-starter. It is twice as big as what the state needs and offers none of the efficiencies of centralizing administration and services that can be done by using land at the Partlow campus in Tuscaloosa. Staying with Bryce makes just as much sense as Carraway would.

Tuscaloosa has benefited from the jobs at Bryce Hospital, but it also has borne great costs as the state has reformed mental health services. Thousands of jobs have been lost. Patients have been released into this community without sufficient support. They have strained not only services for mental health care but also crowded the local jail. An estimate by state Rep. Alan Harper suggests it may amount to more than \$2 million per year in local costs.

The Department of Mental Health should not simply make way for UA's aspirations. UA shouldn't be expected to bankroll mental health services. But the people of Alabama — including those at Bryce today — have an interest in providing for UA's future, preserving Bryce's history and creating a more efficient mental health care delivery system that allows more people to get services in their home counties.

We hope Riley will display the leadership necessary for all of this to happen.

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