

Witt: UA will acquire Bryce

Despite city's plans to sue, university president optimistic

By Adam Jones Staff Writer

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TUSCALOOSA | Although the city of Tuscaloosa plans to sue the state to halt the sale of Bryce Hospital, University of Alabama President Robert Witt is optimistic the sale will still go through.

"I remain optimistic that we will be able to acquire Bryce Hospital for a fair and reasonable price, and that it will remain in Tuscaloosa," Witt said at the fall employee meeting Wednesday.

Tuesday night, the City Council authorized Mayor Walt Maddox to pursue a lawsuit against the state over the potential sale after Gov. Bob Riley said he and the Department of Mental Health will explore an offer to move Bryce's services to a vacant hospital in downtown Birmingham. The state mental institution houses 350 patients and employs

657 people.

Maddox said local officials were left out of discussions and getting an injunction on the sale through the court is the only option to ensure Bryce's jobs remain in

Tuscaloosa.

After the Wednesday meeting, Witt would not comment on the potential lawsuit until he could review it. The city's legal department plans to file the suit later this week.

However, Witt did say the university made a fair offer to the state for the property despite falling about \$24 million short of the amount mental health officials say they want for the property.

"The governor felt it was fair and reasonable," Witt said. "It's still under consideration, and I am optimistic it will be accepted."

After nearly four years of discussions on transferring the Bryce campus to the university, which wants the land for future growth, Riley hired a consultant in hopes of completing the deal before he leaves office in January 2011.

The consultant, former mental health commissioner Kathy Sawyer, released a preliminary report in April that makes a case for a \$84.2 million price tag for most of the Bryce campus. That would be enough to build a new, smaller hospital on the Partlow campus in Tuscaloosa and move about one-third of the clients to community facilities throughout the state.

Earlier this month, UA offered \$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.

Witt said the campus was

appraised at \$50 million, but that price assumed the groundwater pollution was cleared. UA is offering to pay for the cleanup, Witt said.

The appraisal also included the entire 188 acres owned by the mental health department, while UA wants 175 acres, carving out of the sale the more modern Harper Geriatric Center and historic Bryce cemeteries, Witt said.

"We have made a \$60 million commitment," Witt said. "We will not be making a larger offer."

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Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa is pictured Sept. 12, 2008.