

The Crimson White

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New area hospital to house criminally insane

by [William Evans](#)

The state of Alabama's department of mental health has decided that the psychiatric hospital intended to replace Bryce Hospital as a mental health facility will instead become a facility for the criminally insane. Tuscaloosa Mayor Maddox said the change comes after three years of setbacks and curveballs thrown into the works by the state's Department of Mental Health, which he said is strategically cutting off services to patients to keep the budget afloat.

"First of all, we have to understand that the Department of Mental Health is desperately trying to get out of the business of providing service," he said. "Their goal is to push local governments to fund their responsibility, so this is all about pushing down an unfunded mandate by the Department of Mental Health. It is very clear to me that that is going to be their goal, and it appears that they are going to be successful."

The state's Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh announced the change in plan on Feb. 15. Prior to Feb. 15, Baugh had planned for the new Bryce Hospital to take in 115 patients from the soon-to-be-closed Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility in Tuscaloosa and 115 patients from other mental health facilities. The patients transferred from Taylor Hardin would have been court-committed criminal defendants, not necessarily criminally insane.

The scheduled closing of Taylor Hardin by Sept. 30 coincides with the closing of three other mental health facilities out of six in the state. Only the new Bryce Hospital and the Mary Starke Geriatric Facility on the old Bryce Hospital's campus will remain open.

Patients removed from the closed mental health facilities will be entering community treatment homes in neighborhood settings instead of institutional ones, which Maddox deemed detrimental to some patients' mental health.

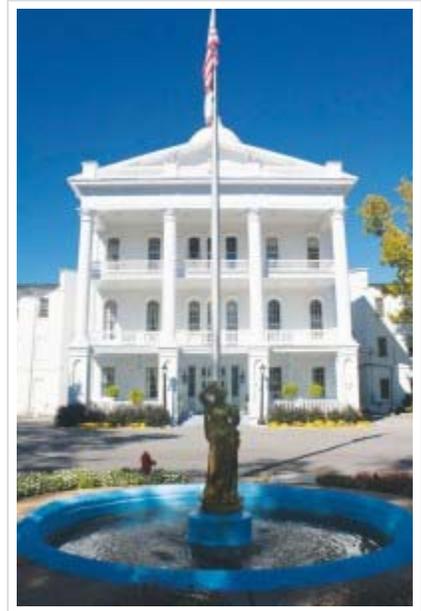
"The community-based system, in theory, is not a perfect setting for each and every mental health consumer," he said. "You're talking about a very small number of consumers, but there are some where treatment within a neighborhood is not going to gain a positive result."

In Dec. 2009, then Gov. Bob Riley said the new Bryce Hospital would be built to house 268 beds for mental health patients. The City insisted that the number be raised to 350, but the recommendation fell on deaf ears, Maddox said.

"The state, over our objections...was in the process of constructing about a 260-bed facility, which we felt would be inadequate, but it's better than having no hospital at all," he said.

Now, Maddox is having to reconsider the assumed disadvantage of having no hospital at all.

When Baugh made her Feb. 15 announcement, construction already had begun on the new Bryce Hospital, which has yet to be named but is scheduled to be opened in May 2013. The psychiatric hospital will be located on the former site of the W.D.



The white-domed campus of Bryce Hospital was built in the early 1800s, but no longer houses any patients. CW | Natalie Nichols

Partlow Developmental Center, which sustained minor damage in the April 27 tornado. The construction site is on University Boulevard East and across from McFarland Boulevard.

The University's campus, landlocked but surging in size after increases in student enrollment, gained about 180 acres in 2009 when the Board of Trustees of the University of Alabama System agreed to buy the 150-year-old Bryce Hospital. For four years, the University had sought to acquire the parcel of land, and on Dec. 30, 2009, Gov. Riley and the Department of Mental Health approved a deal with the University that was worth \$82 million, according to a Dec. 2009 Tuscaloosa News article.

As part of the contract signed between the University and the state, the University has the right to make recommendations concerning the materials and methods used to build the hospital, whereas the Department of Mental Health reserves the power to determine the use and function of the hospital's space.

"Our expectation is that the final decision regarding use of Mental Health's new building will meet the critical needs of everyone concerned," said Deborah Lane, assistant vice president for University Relations, in an emailed statement.

Maddox is not so optimistic.

"It's bad for mental health consumers because we know that through their own statistics, be it the Department of Mental Health, that the recidivism rate is over 50 percent at Bryce," he said. "Where will our consumers go if they went into acute distress issues? Unfortunately, without a mental treatment center, we'll find a large number end up in our homeless population, in our jails and in our court system."

Maddox said he speaks for the city only, and he hesitated to speculate about the University's position on the criminally insane facility becoming adjacent to campus. He has not had a chance to discuss the issue with University President Robert Witt, but he believes the stigma of the facility will discourage businesses from investing in the area most proximate to the hospital.

That also means the Alberta community, devastated in the April storms, could suffer a financial loss.

"Their decision has set off a firestorm of opposition in the Alberta community," he said. "You're talking about a community that lost about 70 percent of its structures and who believed that what was going to be built on that site in their community would be the Bryce Hospital and not what's now being proposed.

"It's shocking what little forethought they put into this recommendation and how they were, and they are, to the impact among so many people, whether it's the consumers, whether it's their employees or whether it's the community around them," he added.

The story does not end with the patients. The state's shift from hospital-based mental health service to community-based care, necessitated by budget cuts and four mental health facilities becoming defunct, will result in 948 mental health department employees being laid off. That number includes about 280 employees at Bryce Hospital losing their jobs when the old building passes into the University's hands and the new psychiatric hospital opens.

But, as always, money takes precedence.

"Ask yourself this question: 'How do 270 mental health consumers on Tuesday need temporary treatment in an institutional setting and then on Wednesday, they're ready to go out the door?'" Maddox said. "We would never drive our decisions about cancer, heart disease or Parkinson's disease based on the budgetary number, but we're willing to risk the mental health of hundreds, if not thousands, of people based on a budget decision?"

"To me, it's a very sad day in Alabama."

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