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Mental health facility sites eyed as state penitentiaries

Governor, Commissioner: 'It's just something we're looking at'

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MONTGOMERY — Gov. Robert Bentley last week said the potential use of soon-to-be-closed mental health facilities in Tuscaloosa and Decatur as state prisons is only in the concept stage.

"It's just something we're looking at," Bentley said Friday.

Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh last week announced that four of the six remaining state mental health hospitals will be closed, including the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility in Tuscaloosa and the North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur.

Baugh said community-based mental health services will be expanded to accommodate the shift of patients into community treatment. Only the Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Facility and the replacement for Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa will remain open.

She set a deadline of Sept. 30 to close the centers and move patients, but Bentley said centers won't close as long as patients remain in them.

Baugh revealed the potential for a second life for the two facilities by the Department of Corrections.

Kim Thomas, commissioner of the Alabama Department of Corrections, said any decision on converting a mental health property to a prison would depend on several factors, including need and cost.

"It did spark my interest," Thomas said. "I want to see the facilities."

For all practical purposes, the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility serves as a prison for court-committed criminal defendants.

Baugh suggested the Decatur facility could become a hospital for inmates with major medical problems, which Thomas said is needed.

Thomas said the "environments" of the Department of Mental Health and the Department of Corrections are different, and he isn't sure whether the facilities could be easily transformed to meet system needs.

There's also the question of funding. "It's really difficult not knowing the fate of the 2013 budget," Thomas said.

Legislators are debating a proposed General Fund budget that Bentley submitted that contains possible 25 percent cuts to some agencies.

Thomas at a budget committee hearing last week briefed legislators on his agency's finances that currently couldn't support adding two new prison facilities. "We don't want to get ahead of ourselves," he said.

