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University of Alabama stops work on Bryce Hospital replacement

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MONTGOMERY – The University of Alabama ordered work stopped on the \$73 million replacement for Bryce Hospital being built near the campus, but no reason was immediately given.

"We were given a suspension of work order by the university and we're waiting instructions on what to do," Kenny Bush, a spokesman for W.G. Yates and Sons Construction, the hospital's general contractor, said Friday.

Bush said the stop-work order was issued about a week ago. The construction site does not show activity, but Bush said the university said to keep its management team in place.

He said he was unaware of the change ordered for the hospital's use by the Department of Mental Health as an eventual replacement for the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility in Tuscaloosa.

When asked about a stop-work order, a spokeswoman for Gov. Robert Bentley wouldn't comment directly.

"No decisions have been made regarding any potential changes to the Bryce Hospital property," Jennifer Ardis said.

The Tuscaloosa News filed a state Open Records law request for the stop-work order late Friday. A university spokeswoman, Deborah Lane, said the request was being processed.

Efforts to reach Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh or her spokesman, Tony Thompson, were unsuccessful.

Baugh, citing state budget cuts, announced last month that the replacement being built for the 151-year-old Bryce Hospital that treats the mentally ill eventually will be used to house court-committed criminal defendants from Taylor Hardin and other facilities.

Baugh on Thursday said she had met Wednesday with Robert Witt, the newly named chancellor of the University of Alabama System and the university's immediate past president, about mental health plans. She didn't mention the university's stop-work order in a brief interview.

She said she planned five regional meetings to explain the department's plans to shift most mental illness care to community settings. A meeting in Andalusia on Thursday was attended by the department's associate commissioner and its general counsel.

Baugh's decision to close state facilities and adapt the replacement Bryce Hospital for a new use has been criticized by state legislators and by Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox.



A University of Alabama board of trustees member, Tuscaloosa County Circuit Judge John England Jr., has questioned whether the decision was in the best interest of the university or the city.

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Baugh wants to close four of six mental health facilities, including Taylor Hardin, and keep the Bryce replacement hospital and the Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Center open.

Patients in the other state hospitals will be placed in communities, she said, and Taylor Hardin patients will be housed at the new Bryce, which is on University Boulevard, a main entrance to the campus.

State Rep. Chris England, D-Tuscaloosa, reacted to the stop-work order.

“The university may have concerns about the concept of a Taylor Hardin medical facility near the campus,” said Chris England. “They agreed to build a hospital for the mentally ill and now going from that hospital to a secure medical facility is quite a jump.”