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## Mental health commissioner to meet with Tuscaloosa leaders

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TUSCALOOSA | Alabama Department of Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh will be in Tuscaloosa today to discuss with Tuscaloosa leaders her plan to close four of the six state mental hospitals and put mentally ill clients into community care.

According to local leaders, there are too many unanswered questions about the plan, which surprised most legislators when it was announced Wednesday.

"We just don't know a lot yet," said Rep. Bill Poole, R-Tuscaloosa.

Poole said he wants to learn more about the state's proposal and meet with mental health professionals in the Tuscaloosa area to find out what issues the community might face before supporting such a move.

According to Baugh's plan, four of the state's six mental health hospitals will close and about 470 patients in those institutions will move into community-based care by Sept. 30.

Bryce Hospital and the Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Psychiatry Center in Tuscaloosa will remain open, but Bryce will be repurposed to house court-committed criminal, or forensic, patients. Those patients are now at Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility, also in Tuscaloosa.

The plan also calls for layoffs of 948 of 1,555 mental health department employees statewide, including 273 at Bryce. The 607 employees who will be retained will work in Tuscaloosa, either at Bryce, an inpatient psychiatric facility for adults, or the Harper Center, an inpatient psychiatric facility for the elderly.

The current Taylor Hardin facility will be offered to the state corrections department for a possible prison.

When the plan was unveiled Wednesday, Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox called it an unfunded mandate by the state that places the responsibility of caring for the mentally ill on local governments.

Maddox said that Baugh requested today's meeting and that he wants a full explanation of the plan. He said there will likely be action on behalf of local leaders to try to stop Baugh's proposal, but that he wants to learn more about it and examine the city's options.

"I think there is potential action on several different fronts, whether seeking remedy through legislative action or taking action through the court system," Maddox said. "Based on what has been presented, this has dire effects for the people of Alabama and for mental health consumers."

In 2009, Tuscaloosa legislators joined the city of Tuscaloosa in a lawsuit to prevent the sale or relocation of Bryce Hospital.

That suit sought a permanent injunction to block the sale of the property to the



University of Alabama and asked the court to declare that only the Legislature could move the psychiatric hospital, which was established in Tuscaloosa in the mid-19th century. The sale of the Bryce campus eventually went through, and the city dropped its suit because a judge ruled the city did not have standing to keep Bryce from being moved.

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Legislators considered taking similar action when the mental health department announced plans in March 2011 to close the W.D. Partlow Developmental Center in Tuscaloosa, the state's only residential facility for people with developmental disabilities. They decided not to go forward since it would likely have had the same result, said Rep. Alan Harper, R-Aliceville.

"We'll have to talk to the attorneys and determine from there what can be done," Harper said Thursday. "Absolutely, something needs to be done. We continue to be inundated from all sides in Tuscaloosa County."

Poole said that if the plan goes through, additional funding for community health services will be imperative to support the patients as they transition into community care, not only in Tuscaloosa but in communities across the state.

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