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Local lawmaker blasts mental health prison plan

By Dana Beyerle

Montgomery Bureau Chief

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MONTGOMERY | State Rep. Chris England on Wednesday told Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh that he rejects her plan to turn the replacement Bryce Hospital being built in Tuscaloosa into a prison for the criminally insane.

England, D-Tuscaloosa, said that when first announced in 2010, there was no mention that the new hospital would become a mental health prison to replace the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility, which is also in Tuscaloosa.

Baugh, last week, reacting to potentially severe budget cuts, said the new hospital would have to become a replacement for Taylor Hardin, which houses the state's mentally ill criminal defendants.

"We don't want that in our community," England said. "In Tuscaloosa, in that area, we don't want anything that appears (to look) like Taylor Hardin."

The hospital is under construction just east of McFarland Boulevard and north of University Boulevard East on the campus of the now-closed W.D. Partlow Developmental Center — a few blocks from the upscale Highlands neighborhood.

England said the hospital will be too close to University Boulevard near DCH Regional Medical Center and tornado-ravaged Alberta.

Much of Alberta was severely damaged by the April 27 tornado that swept across Tuscaloosa, killing about 50. England said businesses and residents will want to return but a hospital-turned-prison would damper redevelopment.

England addressed Baugh at her agency's hearing before a combined House-Senate budget committee where she detailed plans to close four of six mental health facilities and provide current hospital services in community settings.

Baugh said the new facility will not be surrounded by concertina wire as part of Taylor Hardin is and that it will not be an eyesore or even visually announce its use as a prison. She said the building will be secure.

Half its estimated population of 230 inmates will be forensic patients who are now living at other state mental illness hospitals and have ground privileges, she said.

The new hospital will house criminal defendants sent to the Mental Health Department by court order for evaluation to determine if they can stand trial.

"It's near an economically depressed area that is minority saturated and tornado-devastated right next to the University of Alabama," England said. "If located there and it has the same appearance of Taylor Hardin, it makes it more difficult for



AP Photo | Dave Martin

Alabama Department of Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh, left, talks with some of the hundreds of advocates who gathered outside the Alabama State House in Montgomer on Wednesday. Hundreds of advocates and individuals receiving mental health services gathered to raise awareness of key issues and to send a message to lawmakers to not cut mental health funding.

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England, a critic of her plans to close state hospitals, began by telling Baugh he didn't envy her position dealing with potential budget cuts.

"Your plan to close facilities has drawn criticism from constituents," England said. "The concern for us is the city of Tuscaloosa and county will not be prepared for the deadline you propose or for any other deadline."

Baugh told legislators that she wants her closure plan to be complete by Sept. 30, but she added that the safe and adequate placement of current mental hospital residents in community treatment comes first.

Her plan is to close Greil Memorial Psychiatric Hospital in Montgomery, North Alabama Regional Medical Center in Decatur, Searcy Hospital in Mount Vernon and Taylor Hardin. That would leave two mental health facilities in Tuscaloosa, Mary Starke Geriatric Center and the replacement for Bryce Hospital.

Legislators had asked state agency heads to react to a potential 2012-13 budget cut of 25 percent. Baugh said her plan to close facilities would continue whether her budget is cut only 10 percent.

Keeping facilities open would rob state funding needed to provide community services. She said that if she has to keep facilities open, her budget will need another \$118 million to operate facilities and hire 2,100 employees.

Closing facilities will also reduce department employment by more than 950 people, including 22 in the central office.

"If I'm cut 25 percent, 20,641 will lose outpatient and community services," said Baugh, who earlier attended a rally by mental health consumers who receive services in their communities.