

## Mental health chief's plan will hurt UA and Alberta, Tuscaloosa leaders say

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The Alabama Department of Mental Health's decision to transform the psychiatric hospital under construction near the University of Alabama into a facility for the criminally insane has provoked a passionate response from Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox and other local leaders, who say the department should reconsider.

"Here we are, working every single day tirelessly to rebuild our community, and (mental health) throws out these ideas that are detrimental," Maddox said. "It is my belief that a criminally insane facility placed into a gateway of the campus and our city is not in the best interest of the Capstone and Alberta City."

The new hospital is being built on the site of the now-closed W.D. Partlow Developmental Center in the Alberta community, which was devastated by the April 27 tornado.

When state Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh announced the change in plans on Feb. 15, construction had already begun on the hospital, which originally was intended to replace Bryce Hospital, an inpatient facility providing adult psychiatric care that opened in Tuscaloosa more than 150 years ago.

Repurposing the facility to house criminal defendants is part of the department's larger plan to drastically reduce operating costs in the face of severe cuts in the state General Fund budget.

The plan calls for closing four of the six state-run mental health hospitals and transferring patients to community-based care, such as nonprofit group homes. The plan includes shifting current and future court-committed patients in the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility in Tuscaloosa to the new psychiatric hospital, which is on University Boulevard East, across McFarland Boulevard near the UA campus.



*File photo*

The Alabama Department of Mental Health's decision to transform the psychiatric hospital under construction near the University of Alabama into a facility for the criminally insane has provoked a passionate response from Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox and other local leaders, who say the department should reconsider.

But Maddox said moving criminal defendants who have been sent to the Department of Mental Health for evaluation to the replacement Bryce Hospital will affect the university and the recovery of the Alberta community, which was virtually destroyed by the April 27 tornado.

“This is a devastating decision by the Department of Mental Health, the recommendation to place the criminally insane facility adjacent to the rebuilding of the Alberta community and the University of Alabama,” Maddox said. “It will have a detrimental impact on recruiting economic development into Alberta and whether we continue the phenomenal growth at the University of Alabama.”

Tuscaloosa County Circuit Judge John England Jr., who is on the board of trustees of the University of Alabama System, said he was surprised by the plan to change the focus of the new psychiatric hospital, which was proposed as part of UA’s effort to acquire the existing Bryce Hospital campus.

“I’m not sure if we want next to our campus a facility for the criminally insane,” England said last week.

England said nothing on the new use for Bryce has been presented by the university administration to trustees, but it probably will have to be.

Most trustees contacted by The Tuscaloosa News had little to say about the plan for the new hospital.

“As far as the change in direction within the Mental Health Department, it doesn’t have anything to do with the trustees of the university,” said Paul W. Bryant Jr., president pro tempore of the board of trustees.

UA President Robert Witt and UA System Chancellor Malcom Portera could not be reached for comment.

State Sen. Gerald Allen, R-Cottontdale, said the last word on the proposed new use of the replacement Bryce Hospital has not been heard.

Maddox, who calls the new use of the replacement hospital “the 800-pound gorilla,” and England agreed with Allen.

“I don’t think the last word has been heard on that,” said England, who added that he hasn’t discussed it with other trustees. “At some point the university is going to be involved in it.”

Maddox said he has not had a chance to discuss the issue with Witt, but thinks the university would be wise to oppose the change.

“How many people honestly can say they want to be adjacent to that facility on one of the main entrances into our city?” Maddox said. “I think the university needs to think long and hard about that facility.”

Deborah Lane, assistant vice president for university relations, said the Department

of Mental Health “is responsible for making all the decisions about the design and use of the new psychiatric hospital in Tuscaloosa.”

“Our expectation is that the final decision regarding use of Mental Health’s new building will meet the critical needs of everyone concerned,” she said in an email.

According to the original contract between the university trustees and the Department of Mental Health it appears the university has a say in what happens.

The memorandum of understanding signed July 20, 2010, says the “University shall review architectural, engineering and other plans, drawings, specifications and submissions for the construction of the project with the Department of Mental Health.”

The university has the right to “advise owner of any revisions University believes should be made,” the contract states.

“All submissions are subject to review and approval by University and the Owner,” the contract states. “Any rejection of any submission must be accompanied by a description of measures to be taken by University that will result in approval or resubmission or why resubmission of any similar proposal will be rejected.”

Lane said the university’s position is that the contract allows the university to make recommendations regarding the materials and methods used to build the hospital, but that the department will continue to make all decisions regarding the function and use of the space.

The original price tag of the Bryce replacement project was \$81 million and an amendment dated Nov. 27 said the project cost has been reduced to \$71 million. Department of Mental Health chief financial officer David Jackson said that reflects the downward trend in construction costs.

The replacement hospital, which is scheduled to open in May 2013, is designed for 268 beds. Baugh plans to move 115 court-committed forensic patients currently at Taylor Hardin and another 115 lower level court-committed forensic patients at other state facilities to the new Bryce.

But Maddox said he believes Taylor Hardin could be doubled in capacity to house the 230 patients that the replacement Bryce Hospital is scheduled to serve.

Reddoch, a former associate mental health commissioner and a former director of Bryce Hospital and Taylor Hardin, also said he believes Taylor Hardin could be expanded.

Reddoch, who was recently named executive director of Indian Rivers Mental Health Center in Tuscaloosa, said the proposed new use of the replacement Bryce hospital concerns him.

“It takes all the spotlight away from the bigger issues of accommodating change in fulfilling our responsibility of service without Bryce Hospital,” Reddoch said.

England, who also serves on the Indian Rivers Mental Health board, said he is concerned about what appears to be a proposal to eliminate an institution that serves the purpose that Bryce serves — treating the mentally ill in an institution setting.

“I understood the notion that the direction mental health is going is more community-based, but I never understood a total replacement of an institution within a community ... to be a goal. And that appears to have occurred,” England said.

Maddox said he can’t understand how one moment the new Bryce Hospital will keep its original use, and in the next moment it won’t.

“Two hundred-plus mental health consumers need institutional care on Tuesday, and on Wednesday, every one is ready for placement out in the community,” he said.

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