

Hundreds sign petition in Alberta

Residents oppose plans to house court-committed criminals nearby

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Hundreds of Tuscaloosa residents, most of them from the Alberta area, signed a petition Saturday against proposed changes in the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

City Councilman Kip Tyner gathered the signatures, hosting a five-hour petition drive at the Piggly Wiggly on University Boulevard in Alberta.

By 1 p.m., Tyner said he had gathered more than 300 signatures.

“We’ve been doing well. We’re gathering about 100 signatures an hour right now,” he said. “People that have come by are outraged and shocked about these changes. They’re all just in disbelief.”

Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh plans to close four of the state’s six mental health hospitals, lay off 948 mental health department employees and move about 470 patients to community-based care as the department deals with steep budget cuts.

In Tuscaloosa, the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility will close and be offered to the state corrections department for a possible prison, while Bryce Hospital and the Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Psychiatry Center will remain open.

A new facility being built on University Boulevard at the edge of the Alberta community to replace Bryce, an inpatient psychiatric facility for adults, will be repurposed to replace Taylor Hardin, which houses court-committed criminal — or forensic — patients. The existing Bryce will close after the new facility opens.

Tyner said bringing a prison so close to Alberta would be detrimental to the community’s regrowth from the April 27 tornado.

“Sixty percent of this district was devastated. If you put an institution for the criminally insane right here on the main boulevard, you’re going to ruin all of the



Staff photo | Dusty Compton

Tuscaloosa city councilman Kip Tyner, right, talks with Hodo Strickland, left, and Judy Strickland as they sign a petition at the Piggly Wiggly in Alberta Saturday, Feb. 25, 2012. Tyner collected signatures Saturday to oppose the mental health system changes in Alabama.



progress we've seen," he said.

Tyner said several businesses have expressed interest in building in Alberta, including a few looking to relocate from other areas in Tuscaloosa.

"It would just kill the economic growth we're seeing," he said.

Tyner said he's been slammed with emails from concerned constituents in his district over the changes. He said many wouldn't feel safe with such a facility so close to residences.

"I've talked to employees at both Bryce and Taylor Hardin, and they've said they're not sure this new facility is going to be secure enough for such prisoners," he said. "This is a dangerous situation, because 50 percent of those being treated there are considered dangerous."

Just about everyone leaving the Piggly Wiggly and the Dollar General in the same shopping center stopped to sign Tyner's petition. Very few would share their names with The Tuscaloosa News or comment on the situation.

One woman said she signed because she lives near Jack Warner Parkway and doesn't want to see the current Taylor Hardin facility be repurposed as a prison.

Another man who signed said he understood "having to make cuts, but you've got to be wise. This isn't wise."

Tyner said he spoke with a few Bryce and Taylor Hardin employees who wanted to sign, but were afraid they would be jeopardizing their jobs.

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