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University of Alabama halts work on Bryce Hospital replacement

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Published: Saturday, March 10, 2012 at 3:30 a.m.

MONTGOMERY | The University of Alabama ordered work stopped on the \$73 million psychiatric hospital being built near the campus to replace Bryce Hospital, 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," said Kenny Bush, a spokesman for W.G. Yates and Sons Construction, the hospital's general contractor on Friday.



Michelle Lepianka Carter | Tuscaloosa News

The University of Alabama issued a stop-work order on the psychiatric hospital being built near campus to replace Bryce Hospital, shown Feb. 15 in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

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.

Bush 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, Jennifer Ardis, a spokeswoman for Gov. Robert Bentley, would not comment directly. "No decisions have been made regarding any potential changes to the Bryce Hospital property," she said.

The Tuscaloosa News filed a state open records law request for the stop-work order late Friday.

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 hospital being built to replace the 151-year-old Bryce Hospital, an inpatient facility for the mentally ill, eventually will be used instead 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 former president, about mental health plans. In a brief interview, she didn't mention the university's stop-work order.

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 UA board of trustee member, Tuscaloosa County Circuit Judge John England Jr., has questioned whether the decision is 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 Psychiatry Center in Tuscaloosa 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 being built on the site of the former W.D. Partlow Developmental Center on University Boulevard, which is a main entrance to the UA 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.”