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Bentley to announce new mental health plans Friday

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MONTGOMERY | Gov. Robert Bentley said today that he will reveal his new operating and patient treatment plan for the Department of Mental Health on Friday in Tuscaloosa.

Bentley said the plan is the result of consultations with state Mental Health Commissioner Zelia Baugh, legislators, state mental health advisory board members and of his 34 years' experience as a dermatologist who often treated mentally ill patients in Tuscaloosa.

"I asked Zelia to bring me six different options and they did, even though I had talked about one that I favored the most and (I) ended up with that one," said Bentley, a retired physician, prior to speaking at a community college event.

"I believe we have come up with a good and fair solution not only for our patients but our probate judges and our local delegation and for Tuscaloosa."

Bentley said he will unveil his plan at 2 p.m. Friday. His office said late this morning that the location in Tuscaloosa has not been decided.

Baugh in February announced a plan to close four of six mental illness facilities in Tuscaloosa, Decatur, Montgomery and Mt. Vernon and treat all mental illness patients in community settings. Nearly 950 state employees were to lose jobs although some were eligible to retire.

Slated for closing were the Greil Memorial Hospital in Montgomery, Searcy Hospital in Mt. Vernon, the North Alabama Regional Hospital in Decatur and the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility in Tuscaloosa.

Baugh planned to set up regional centers for temporary probate court commitments and to transfer most of the state's hospitalized mentally ill patients to community-based care.

Her plan was to keep open the Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Facility in Tuscaloosa and eventually switch the intended use of the replacement Bryce Hospital from an inpatient psychiatric hospital to a secure medical facility for the criminally committed.

That would have meant a reduction in force and potential layoffs of 948 employees and the shift of at least 473 hospital residents into community based treatment.

She originally sought a Sept. 30 closure date for all but the Taylor Hardin facility but Bentley later postponed the closures to an undetermined date.

The University of Alabama in 2010 bought the 150-year-old Bryce Hospital property near the campus for future expansion. The mental health department planned to use sale proceeds to finance a replacement psychiatric hospital on the W.D. Partlow Developmental Center campus on University Boulevard East.

Facing significant budget cuts for next fiscal year, Baugh sought to minimize the



budget impact by closing facilities and utilizing community treatment.

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But the switch in the proposed use of the new Bryce Hospital and the closure plan produced significant opposition from Tuscaloosa legislators, a Morgan County senator and from a University of Alabama System board of trustee member, Tuscaloosa County Circuit Judge John England Jr.

After the outcry, Bentley halted construction of the replacement Bryce Hospital and directed Baugh to develop a new plan. She held a series of area meetings for mental health stakeholders.

Reps. Alan Harper, R-Aliceville, and Chris England, D-Tuscaloosa, and Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, said they recently discussed the Bryce plan with Bentley.

“Our goal and what we discussed with the governor is we want the new Bryce Hospital to be built in Tuscaloosa just like it was started and announced by (former) Gov. (Bob) Riley,” said Harper. “We did our best to plead our case that it is an asset to Tuscaloosa County and to leave Tuscaloosa County would be bad.”

Orr said it was important to his constituents to keep the North Alabama hospital open.

Orr said that Montgomery, Tuscaloosa, and Mobile counties have significant state operations and that closing the largest state presence in Morgan County would be a blow to the region.

“I wanted to stress to him the significance of that facility to the area,” Orr said.

There has been speculations that the North Alabama Regional Hospital could be used for lower-level court-committed patients and keep Taylor Hardin open for harder cases.

Bentley would not reveal his new plan but said “all options” were on the table.

The Department of Mental Health for three weeks has refused to comply with numerous requests from The Tuscaloosa News to disclose how much had been spent on the Bryce replacement hospital before construction was halted.

Legislators said University of Alabama officials told them that \$12 million has been spent on the Bryce replacement but university officials have not complied with a request from The News for financial information. UA is the construction manager on the facility, which was expected to cost \$73 million and had been scheduled to open in May 2013.