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Waste authority purchases 529 acres for \$4.23 million

Landfill expansion will extend service beyond 2060

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The Black Warrior Solid Waste Disposal Authority has bought more than three-quarters of a square mile of property adjacent to its Tuscaloosa County landfill from the Alabama Department of Mental Health. It plans to use the land for future landfill expansion and to buffer against eventual city growth.



Staff graphic | Anthony Bratina

The landfill is next to U.S. Highway 82 on the western edge of Northport. Earlier this year, the authority bought three parcels totaling 529 acres for \$4.23 million to add to the landfill's existing 300 acres, according to records at the Department of Conservation. The department handles land sales for the state.

According to the minutes of the waste authority's governing board, the additional property will extend the life of the landfill beyond 2060 and was less expensive than establishing an auxiliary landfill in a more remote location.

"That land is adjacent to our landfill," said Tuscaloosa attorney Bob Ennis, a member of the board. "If we went to another location, it would take another \$5 million up front."

Dirt from the purchased property eventually can be used to cover existing landfill cells. Establishing a remote auxiliary landfill would require equipment, time and travel costs, board minutes said.

The largest of the three new parcels is a 324-acre tract between Mount Olive Road and Rose Boulevard, on the east side of the existing landfill. A 153-acre tract is on the east side of Rose Boulevard, and the smallest parcel, 35 acres, is adjacent to U.S. 82 on the west side of the landfill.

According to the conservation department's land division, the landfill authority approached the state a year ago about buying the property. The solid waste authority board approved the purchase in February, its minutes show. The deed was filed in March.

Mental health department spokesman Jeff Shackelford said the department did not announce the sale because it was a government-to-government agency transaction and was not subject to bid laws. Shackelford said the \$4.23 million went into the mental health department's budget.

The sale came at a critical time for the department, which was struggling with closing facilities and consolidating services, in part because of budget woes.

Jeremy King, a spokesman for Gov. Robert Bentley, said the department needed the money.



"This is land that had not been used in a very long time, and it made sense to sell it and let that land bring in revenue," King said.

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Ennis said Wednesday that the purchase price of nearly \$8,000 an acre better reflected the property's value to the solid waste authority because of its location and based on internal valuations of other property the authority has sought.

"We had been negotiating purchases of land for three years and we're well aware of potential land values," Ennis said.

"We looked at other sites and we knew what the land's value was, and it was more valuable to us."

The Department of Conservation hired an appraiser who determined similar property in east-central Mississippi was worth between \$2,500 and \$3,000 an acre. The appraiser, Maurice Mitchell, said there were insufficient recent land sales in the Northport area for comparison, so he picked transactions in Mississippi that involved similar land, populations and economies.

Ennis said the landfill authority bought property in 1995, 2002 and 2006 for between \$5,073 and \$6,900 per acre. Inflation and the passage of time increased the values of those properties to between \$7,537 and \$7,841 an acre, he said.

The Black Warrior Solid Waste Authority is a public agency that was created by Tuscaloosa County and the cities of Tuscaloosa and Northport in 1993. It manages the 19-year-old landfill, which serves the county, Northport and Tuscaloosa, but also receives garbage from the University of Alabama and from private waste haulers in the county.

The landfill, which is licensed by the Alabama Department of Environmental Management, was originally designed to last at least 40 years.

About 70 acres of the landfill has been used but, because of regulations, not all of the remaining 230 acres can be used to bury household garbage, said Ken Thrasher, the authority's executive director.

"This (purchase) gives the authority not only for our generation but for future generations (the opportunity) to fulfill its needs for solid waste," Thrasher said.

The largest of the three parcels purchased is the former Camp Partlow recreational site that once was used by residents of state mental health facilities in Tuscaloosa. It included cabins, a pavilion, a building and a lake, said former Mental Health Commissioner Virginia Rogers.

She said Friends of Partlow helped develop the property. The Jaycees and the Boy Scouts also used the property and did volunteer work there, she said.