

Banking on Bryce: A good move in Tuscaloosa

by The Anniston Star Editorial Board

01.20.10 - 03:00 am

The buzz and excitement of the University of Alabama's BCS national championship may have obscured another piece of critical news from that part of the state.

Last week, the university's Board of Trustees approved the \$72 million purchase of the Bryce Hospital campus. Historically, Bryce Hospital has been the major center for the state's treatment of mental illness since 1861.

For university students and the state itself, the trustees' approval of that sale may prove more significant than winning a crystal football and the Crimson Tide's 13th national title.

The purchase will increase the size of the university's campus by nearly one-third. The university has grown in recent years, but so, too, has the city of Tuscaloosa. The campus and the city sit hard against each other, with little room for expansion. Buying Bryce will give the university room for future growth.

If for no other reason, this was a wise move.

As part of the deal, the university will conduct an environmental cleanup of the sort any former medical facility needs. Trustees also have promised to preserve the historically significant structures that are part of the hospital campus. The university should be urged to work closely with the Alabama Department of Environmental Management and the Alabama Historical Commission to accomplish those tasks.

With the money the university pays the state for the Bryce campus, the Alabama Mental Health Advisory Board has agreed to build a new psychiatric hospital in Tuscaloosa — solving one of the negotiation's top points of contention. Rightly, the city had feared that if Bryce were sold, the mental health facility would be relocated elsewhere.

Now it will stay in Tuscaloosa. In addition, the Mental Health Advisory Board will also expand community-based care statewide, something this page has advocated for some time.

The money for this transaction — \$72 million — will come from royalties from oil, natural gas and coal reserves that are under university-owned land. Thus, there is no direct allocation from the state.

All in all, this is a splendid move. Though it will never get the publicity that comes with a football national championship — and it will seldom be listed as one of the university's top accomplishments — it should not be undersold.

More mentally ill Alabamians who need help will get it because of this agreement. And, future Alabama students who never attend a game at Bryant-Denny Stadium will find a university large enough for them.