

The Northport Gazette

NEWS

Bryce to remain in T-Town

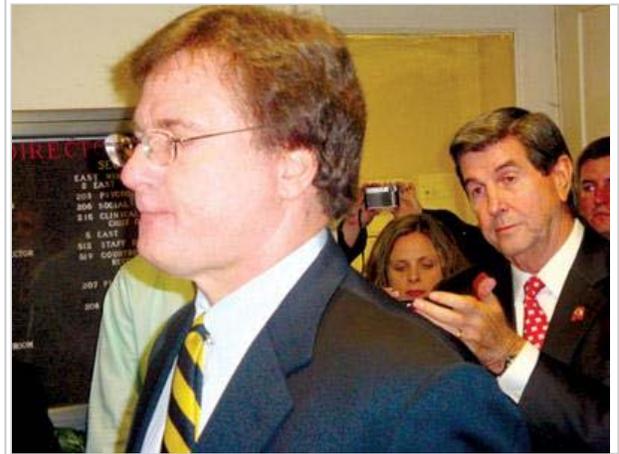
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By John Cargile

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TUSCALOOSA – Alabama Republican Governor Bob Riley and Senator Phil Poole (D-Moundville) announced last week that the University of Alabama would be allowed to purchase the property where Bryce Hospital is now located, and a new state-of-the-art hospital for mental health patients would be built on property at Partlow Developmental Center.

With Northport Mayor Bobby Herndon in attendance, along with Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox, the Tuscaloosa County Commission (with the exception of Commission President Hardy McCollum), and state representatives, Riley made the historic announcement last week to keep Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa.



Senator Phil Poole and Governor Bob Riley. Photo by John Cargile.

Tuscaloosa officials feared the governor and mental health board were near a decision to move Bryce Hospital to Birmingham in the old, vacated Carraway Hospital on the city's north side.

The announcement came just a few days before a lawsuit filed by the City of Tuscaloosa was expected to see its day in court.

"This is going to be a day we look back on one day and see that we really did the right thing for the people we are entrusted to make decisions for," Riley said.

"We're about to build a facility that is as technologically advanced as any in the United States," Riley said. "That the underlying highlight to capitalize the win-win for the benefit of the residents of Bryce today. All of us have a sense of urgency we need to take into consideration."

The university had offered \$60 million for the hospital and for environmental remediation and historic preservation, but the board in October rejected that amount. Last week a state bond commission approved using state bonding authority to provide the remaining \$22 million. Bond issue approval could occur in January or February, Riley said.

Earlier Wednesday the Mental Health Advisory Board of Trustees met in Riley's office in Montgomery and approved to negotiate the sale of the Bryce Hospital property with the University of Alabama for up to \$82 million.

The board also approved the construction of a replacement for Bryce Hospital and its services on land at Partlow Developmental Center, a facility for people with mental disabilities across McFarland Boulevard from Bryce.

Riley thanked everyone who had been involved in negotiations, especially the state representatives serving Tuscaloosa County, including Senator Poole and Northport Mayor Herndon and Tuscaloosa

Mayor Maddox.

"It gives the university the opportunity today to begin planning how they are going to systematically have a program growth here that without this might not be possible," said Riley. University of Alabama President Robert Witt was in attendance.

Witt has said obtaining the Bryce campus was an important investment in the future of UA.

Riley said with all the many conversations concerning what is best for Bryce Hospital and its patients; no one had done more than Poole who represents Tuscaloosa County. Poole was able to organize a coalition of local elected officials to put pressure on the governor's office and the mental health board.

Representative Gerald Allen, who serves Tuscaloosa County, said he mentioned the issue of Bryce Hospital when Riley first took office.

"That was five years ago," Allen said. Riley thanked Allen for his early discussions about the university's desire to purchase the property for expansion and where the subsequent mental hospital could be located.

Riley and Poole agreed that they both each had their own political differences in the past, but the ultimate decision announced last week crossed party lines.

"Both the governor and I knew we could agree on some things such as the welfare of the patients and that we needed to look out for the welfare of the employees," Poole said. "We just needed to come up with a plan."

Moving Bryce to Birmingham would have displaced 650 Bryce employees in Tuscaloosa. Bryce has been in Tuscaloosa nearly 150 years.

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Riley was asked if there was consideration to privatize the new mental health facility.

Riley said it's up to the board of trustees to consider privatization but he senses no enthusiasm for it.

The campus was appraised at \$50 million, but that price assumed the groundwater pollution from when Bryce was nearly a self-reliant town was cleared. UA is offering to \$3.5 million to pay for the cleanup.

Also, as part of the deal, UA will pay \$6.5 million to renovate and preserve the main, white domed building most associated with Bryce.