

Consultant offers plan for Bryce sale

By Adam Jones Staff Writer

Published: Saturday, April 25, 2009 at 3:30 a.m.

TUSCALOOSA | The decision whether to sell Bryce Hospital and its campus to the University of Alabama should be made within two months, a consultant hired by the governor recommends.

"If you are working to do this before [Gov. Bob Riley] leaves [office], you need to have a tentative agreement in 60 days," said Kathy Sawyer, former mental health commissioner hired by Riley to gather facts and recommend options for Bryce.

"I understand not all the i's would be dotted and whatnot, but the university should know in 60 days if this is way out of their price range. If it is, this is over."

Sawyer's preliminary report and recommendations on the future of the Bryce campus and mental health programs located there was released Friday. It's a road map for selling the property to the university, and justifies what the Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation estimates it will cost to replace Bryce.

Sawyer estimates in her report that it would cost \$84.2 million to replace Bryce and shift its patients. She recommends that as the sale price for the hospital and its 188-acre campus. The Bryce property was appraised at \$43 million in 2005, but 18 acres were later sold to UA.

UA President Robert Witt was out of town Friday and has not seen the final draft of the report, according to a spokesperson. No response was immediately available from the university.

The vision Sawyer presents in her report is to build a smaller mental hospital in Tuscaloosa, moving about a third of Bryce's patients to group homes across the state. She suggests the state explore whether it would be cheaper for a private company to manage the hospital, with "consumer performance indicators" so that treatment wouldn't suffer.

The transition — including plans already under way to close the Alice Kidd Nursing Facility and the Adolescent School on the Bryce campus — would reduce the work force by about 140 jobs, according to Sawyer's analysis. State Mental Health Commissioner John Houston said Friday he believes it can be accomplished without layoffs.

Officials with UA and the mental health department have been talking of transferring the Bryce campus for nearly four years. Sawyer was hired by the governor in late December to speed the process in hopes of reaching a deal before Riley leaves office in early 2011.

"I believe it's doable," Houston said.

UA presidents have coveted the adjacent land for decades since it would provide enough room for any foreseeable expansion. President Robert Witt and his administration expressed interest in Bryce in 2005, kicking off four years of assessment and talks.

With booming enrollment and limited space on campus for new buildings, Witt has said it will be difficult to find space for new students and employees without Bryce, about a third of the size of UA.

In her report, Sawyer notes that not acting would be expensive for the department since the vast majority of the Bryce campus is a vacant, rundown ghost town. The number of patients at Bryce has declined from a peak of nearly 5,000 in 1971 to 342 patients today as new therapies allowed for community-based care.

Even as patients have left, the cost of maintaining the campus has grown each year by about \$460,000. This year the cost is \$2.7 million, money better spent on patients, Sawyer wrote.

Besides buildings, the groundwater under Bryce is contaminated from when the campus was larger and nearly a self-sufficient city. Cleanup costs would be at least \$300,000 annually.

Moving patients to community-

based care would save \$6.4 million annually, according to the report.

Despite the seemingly win-win sale for both institutions, money is the sticking point.



(Staff photo | Dan Lopez)

Ex-mental health commissioner Kathy Sawyer, right, stands with the current commissioner, John Houston, in front of Bryce Hospital on Friday.

Mental health officials have always stressed there would be no sale until they decide how best to transfer services and patients, a complex situation that has involved evaluating the entire mental health system. Two studies were completed by the department in 2008, but mental health officials said they don't have the money to implement changes.

"At the end of the day, there might not be a sale because the mental health department needs a certain amount of money to maintain quality care," she said.

In September, UA's president said he couldn't envision trustees agreeing to pay more than the appraised value of the property.

Sawyer wrote that it's up to the governor "to broker the state's resources for the good of both institutions."

Sawyer suggested that a new Bryce Hospital be built at nearby Partlow Developmental Center, the department's residential facility for patients with cognitive disorders and mental disabilities.

The university would get all of the Bryce campus except the historic cemeteries and the Harper Geriatric Psychiatry Center, a 13-year-old building that provides care to the elderly with mental health disabilities. It would remain on the northeast corner of the campus.

In taking over the Bryce campus, Sawyer recommends UA agree to preserve and pay for the maintenance of a few of the historic buildings, including the main, domed building and the tree-lined drive leading to it. Also, UA would pay for cleaning up contamination.

And, UA could not flip the property for profit to a private developer in the short-term without giving some of the money to the department.

"We are giving up selling 200 acres on the open market," Sawyer said.

"UA gets 188 acres they can't get anywhere else."

Separate from the negotiations with the university, Sawyer also recommends the mental health department see if contracting a private company to manage Bryce would be cheaper, although she said privatization is not a foregone conclusion.

Houston stressed that no decisions have been made.

"Contrary to what some might have suggested, there is no decision on a sale or who might operate a new hospital, if we get to that point," he said.

Copyright © 2010 TuscaloosaNews.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.