

## Interim report on Bryce sale gives outline

*Published: Sunday, April 26, 2009 at 3:30 a.m.*

The University of Alabama and the state Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation have plenty of work to do during the next couple months as they negotiate for the transfer of the Bryce Hospital campus. The financial details may change significantly from the \$84 million-plus price tag suggested by a consultant in an interim report issued Friday. But at least we have a clear road map.

We commend Kathy Sawyer for her open process in carrying out her charge from Gov. Bob Riley to examine how the Bryce deal can be accomplished. She has balanced the costs against the concerns of patients and their families, staff and professionals, politicians and the broader community.

It remains to be seen how the scale tilts when this is all complete. But we are more hopeful now than we have been that everyone's interests will be considered.

Sawyer was mental health commissioner under Gov. Don Siegelman and re-appointed by Riley, retiring from the department in 2005 after more than 25 years of service. But her experience as a private consultant during the past three years have given her a broader perspective that comes through clearly in her interim report.

Still, we recognize that Sawyer's report is focused on the interests of the residents at Bryce and the needs of the Department of Mental Health. UA administrators see things from the other side of Campus Drive.

The biggest sticking point will be cost. If that can't be worked out, then there is little point in working through Sawyers' other recommendations, such as evaluating privatization of services, expanding community-based care and preserving the historically significant sites at Bryce.

UA has a \$43 million appraisal for 200 acres at Bryce, but that includes 19 acres of Bryce land that was later sold to UA. Also, it doesn't include the cost of cleaning up contamination caused by decades of leaking gasoline tanks, spilled laundry chemicals and other toxins.

Sawyer's approach, appropriately, started from a different direction, looking at how much it would cost to build a smaller, modern mental hospital on other Mental Health land nearby and provide community-based care for patients who don't need to be in a state institution. She estimates that at about \$81 million.

We aren't sure either of those approaches will work in the final analysis. The true value of the land — perhaps the most valuable tract for development in the city — can't be known without putting it on the open market. But using a cost basis for the deal assumes higher education should, to some degree, underwrite the modernization of mental health services.

Instead, Riley may need to find a middle ground that protects mental health patients, puts the Bryce property to its best public use and looks out for taxpayers in the long-term. This appears to be the best opportunity to achieve those goals that has come along in all the years this transfer has been discussed.

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