

## UA must weigh risks of Bryce buy

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TUSCALOOSA | Although obtaining the Bryce Hospital campus would be one of the defining achievements of University of Alabama President Robert Witt's tenure, the proposed terms of sale are not without risk to the university.

University administrators are studying a proposal on how to buy most of the 188-acre Bryce campus and must decide if UA can afford to buy and maintain the property.

'It's in the university's hands,' said John Houston, commissioner of the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

UA provided former state mental health commissioner Kathy Sawyer a map of what the Bryce campus, which is adjacent to the UA campus, might look like in the future. Nearly every nook and cranny of the campus has a potential use, with what appears to be a new varsity track and field stadium in the east part of the property alongside intramural fields in the southeast, a 'Bryce Memorial Park' in the middle and multiple academic and administrative buildings in the west and north.

Under that ambitious plan, environmental clean-up would likely be more involved than Bryce's current efforts, which are not as extensive because Bryce has no intended use for the vast majority of the campus.

Most of the focus in four years of talks between the state agencies has been on options for Bryce's patients and the continuation of their care. But if UA buys the property, the patients will have been moved out, leaving the university to figure out how to preserve several historical buildings and clean up groundwater pollution on the Bryce property, among other concerns.

'As the parties involved continue to gather information, we look forward to working with them to develop a solution that meets the needs of the patients and their families, the community and the university,' Witt said in a statement he released when asked about the proposal.

Gov. Bob Riley hired Sawyer in December to gather facts and recommend options for Bryce and its patients. She released her preliminary report on the possible sale in April.

The report is a road map for selling the property to the university that justifies what the mental health department estimates will be the cost of replacing Bryce.

Sawyer recommends the mental health department sell the campus for \$84.2 million, enough to build a new hospital elsewhere in town and pay for the placement of about a quarter of its 300-400 patients in community facilities. The sale would also wipe the costs of campus upkeep off the department's books.

In return, UA would get a plot of land about a third the size of the existing UA campus, likely at a cheaper price than what the land would fetch on the open market, Sawyer said.

Besides environmental concerns, Sawyer recommends that the possible sale to the university include an agreement that UA maintain seven historical aspects of the campus — mostly the main, domed building and the buildings along the tree-lined drive leading to it — and restore a small portion of the main building as a museum.

UA would also be saddled with the clean-up of diesel fuel and chemicals from laundry dry cleaning — used when Bryce was a self-supported city — that has since seeped into the groundwater.

Sawyer said representatives from both institutions need to approach negotiations with an open mind.

'People have got to realize both will be giving up something,' she said.

She recommends university and mental health administrators decide in June whether the sale is feasible.

Working against a tight timetable, the university has hired a property appraiser to assess the impact of groundwater pollution on the property's value.

'It's a real gray question area because nobody knows the extent of it,' said Bob Enslin of Realvest, an appraisal services firm in Montgomery.

In a letter to Sawyer, officials with TTL Inc., a Tuscaloosa-based environmental company working with Bryce and the Alabama Department of Environmental Management on the clean-up of the ground pollution, estimates an annual cost of \$300,000 to maintain current efforts, plus another

\$1.9 million to \$2.5 million to clean up two acres on the UA campus where pollution has crept.

However, TTL officials wrote in a letter to Sawyer that an accurate assessment of the cost is hard to determine without plans for how the land will be used.

In a possible indication of how thorough a clean-up UA officials would want if they acquired Bryce, UA requested TTL clean its two acres for unrestricted land use, more stringent than ADEM requirements, according to the letter.

Witt and UA officials have said they have not planned any set use for the land, but Witt said acquisition of the Bryce campus would be necessary to continue campus growth and expansion.

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