

Panel urges landmark protection for Bryce

By Adam Jones Staff Writer

Published: Wednesday, July 16, 2008 at 3:30 a.m.

TUSCALOOSA | With a deadline to apply for National Historic Landmark status a month away, several members of the state Department of Mental Health committee charged with preserving the historical components of Bryce Hospital said Tuesday that they are worried the University of Alabama may be trying to thwart the application.

The deadline is Aug. 15.

'There may very well be good reasons for not doing this, and we would need to respect that,' said Tom Hobbs, executive director of Western Mental Health Center and chair of the Bryce Historical and Preservation Committee. 'If there aren't, we are going to press forward. It's becoming a little urgent now.'

But UA administrators said they simply need more time to research the situation to determine whether the historical designation would hurt the university if it owned the building. That was why UA opposed previous application attempts last fall and spring, Hobbs said.

'The university has stringently opposed this,' he said.

In a

plea to the committee during its meeting Tuesday, member Paul Davis, publisher of newspapers in Tuskegee and Tallassee, said the committee needs to be bolder in its attempts to preserve Bryce Hospital and its cemeteries.

'[The university] will rape this in

stitution because it will be in the best interest of the university and the state,' Davis said. 'This is a national landmark, and it must be preserved, and if that takes screaming and shouting, then you scream and shout.'

The university has negotiated with the Alabama Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation for nearly two years to buy the 209-acre Bryce property, which adjoins the UA campus.

UA President Robert Witt told trustees in June that the sale could happen within the next year. However, mental health officials have maintained Bryce won't be sold until a department-wide strategic plan is finished, and then only if the sale fits within the plan.

Based on his review of National Park Service rules and federal law, Hobbs said the landmark designation would not place any additional hindrances on the university than are currently on the building, which is already on the National Registry of Historic Places.

Witt has said in the past that UA does not have a plan for developing the Bryce property if it were to become part of the university, and that buildings on the registry would be preserved.

'The university fully understands and respects the historical significance of the Bryce Hospital,' said Lynda Gilbert, vice president for finance at UA, in a

statement Tuesday.

At the heart of the Bryce campus is the original hospital building, built in 1861. Noted architect Samuel Sloan designed the expansive, white hospital with a dome visible from campus through the long tree-lined drive leading from the gate.

Much of the building is now unused, housing administrative offices and no patients. The old hospital is in visible disrepair, and inside, the vacant wings are in shambles.

No money has been put into building maintenance for years, said David Bennett, associate mental health commissioner of administration.

The department is working to get the building eligible for insurance again, having recently paid to fix the fire alarm and sprinkler system, and \$800,000 has been earmarked to repair roof leaks that are rotting the building, Bennett told the committee.



STAFF FILE PHOTO | ROBERT SUTTON

The Bryce building and other other landmarks were photographed while on a tour of the Bryce campus.

If it were upgraded to national landmark status, the old hospital could be eligible for federal restoration money.

Advocates for the building's preservation said it deserves national landmark status because it was the model hospital in the national movement in the mid-19th century to reform mental health treatment.

'It's, first of all, symbolic,' Hobbs said. 'It gives Bryce Hospital the national recognition it so richly deserves.'

Besides the main hospital, the committee is charged with preserving the Bryce campus' three cemeteries, documents and other artifacts.

Hobbs expects to hear from UA officials by the committee's next meeting Aug. 5, when the decision whether to apply for National Landmark status will be made.

Reach Adam Jones at adam.jones@tuscaloosaneews.com or 205-722-0230.

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