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Upgrade sought for Bryce Hospital's historical designation

By Adam Jones Staff Writer
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TUSCALOOSA | An application to upgrade Bryce Hospital's federal historical designation will be submitted after administrators at the University of Alabama and a historical preservation committee agreed the designation would not hinder plans for Bryce's original building.

Tom Hobbs, chair of the state mental health department's Bryce Historical and Preservation Committee, said he and Lynda Gilbert, UA vice president of financial affairs, met Friday and agreed that improving the historical designation would not restrict what could be done with the nearly 150-year-old building at the center of the Bryce campus.

The agreement comes after UA officials previously objected to applications in the fall and spring, halting the process to mark Bryce's original building as nationally significant on the National Registry of Historic Places. It is currently listed as historically significant to the state, and the national designation would mean eligibility for federal restoration money.

In a statement released after the meeting, Gilbert said the complexities of historic preservation were cleared up after the discussion.

'More importantly, I believe we share a common understanding and respect for the important role the original Bryce Hospital building occupies in the history of mental health development in our state and our nation, as well as the history of our university,' she said.

At the preservation committee's meeting in July, several members were concerned that UA administrators were trying to thwart the effort to upgrade Bryce's historical designation.

Under the agreement, the historic registry application will not include any structures not currently on the registry, which leaves out nearly everything but the white, domed building most visibly associated with Bryce and its later additions, said Hobbs, who is also the executive director of Western Mental Health Center.

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. Most committee members talked during the meeting as if UA's future ownership of Bryce was fact, often glancing at Gilbert, who sat in, when referencing what the university may do once in charge.

'We can't predict the future, all we can do is make recommendations,' Hobbs told the committee. 'We are assuming the university will own this building. We don't know that, but it seems highly probable.'

For his part, UA President Robert 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.

Committee members agree preservation of the main building is paramount. Formed by state Mental Health Commissioner John Houston in April, the committee will recommend what to do with Bryce's historical buildings, extensive documents, cemeteries and artifacts.

On Tuesday, the committee voted to send Houston a list of buildings that should be preserved by the mental health department or possibly the university. That list includes the main building along with the tree-lined drive leading to it and a mansion that used to house hospital superintendents and families.

Sitting at the heart of the Bryce campus, the original hospital building was designed in 1861 by noted architect Samuel Sloan. It was built according to Thomas Kirkbride's then revolutionary theory for treating the mentally ill in a clean, hotel-like atmosphere situated in a park.

Bryce is closest to Kirkbride's idea, and was the model for asylums throughout the 1800s, Hobbs said.

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.

The mental health department hired an architect to estimate the cost of renovation, but Hobbs said he has seen no ballpark figure yet.

'I think the costs are going to be very, very intimidating,' he said.

Deciding to scrap the idea of restoring the building to its original state, the committee instead debated Tuesday what should remain inside the building if the department or UA were to renovate.

Gilbert told the committee the more restrictions placed on the building, the more likely it would be to be demolished. She said the university respected the outside and inside historical character in renovating its own buildings, but a building must, above all, be useful.

'It's a compromise always when you're in a historic building,' Gilbert said. 'We have more experience with that than most people because we are old, even older than Bryce.'

Robert Mellown, committee member and UA professor of art history who wrote a book on Bryce, said preservation money should be spent on the exterior character and, perhaps, restoration of a room or ward in the hospital for any possible mental health museum.

The committee also decided to send a second list to Houston of most every other building on the Bryce campus ranked by historical significance. Members agreed many of these buildings would probably be razed, but wanted to ensure they were documented before the wrecking ball comes.

'From a practical standpoint, we will be doing good if we preserve the historical footprint of the Kirkbride building,' said Mellown. 'These other buildings, if we were in a perfect world with millions of dollars, we would restore them, but we don't have that money and neither does the university.'

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

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