

UA is not giving Bryce enough money, credit for its past services

Published: Sunday, October 18, 2009 at 3:30 a.m.

The University of Alabama does several things very well. First and foremost, it wins football games. It also provides good education opportunities for its students and it generally gets what it wants. It's doing quite well on the first of those three objectives. The fourth, however has hit a snag.

It wants all the Bryce Hospital land which adjoins its campus, and it is hell-bent on getting it. It has offered \$50 million for the site, which contains slightly less than 200 acres. It has already acquired most of the frontage property along University Boulevard, a main thoroughfare which leads to campus, then on through downtown Tuscaloosa.

The university's recent offer came at a meeting of the board of trustees of the Alabama Department of Mental Health held in the decaying domed main building at Bryce. No representative from the university attended. Gov. Bob Riley, as chairman of the mental health board did. I sit on the board of trustees and made the motion that the university's bid be rejected. It passed unanimously.

But the situation is more complicated than that. Earlier this year at another meeting, I made another motion. I said the university desperately needed the land. It is boxed in on every side. It has no room to grow. I moved that the board sell the land — all the land — to UA. That motion also passed unanimously. The only provision was that the university pay enough to build or acquire a new faculty, preserve as an historic structure the main buildings at Bryce and its historic cemeteries.

That's a small price to pay for the pristine acreage in the heart of the city, land which the university badly needs and must have. I suggested \$100 million. The university scoffed at that, first talking about something in the range of \$38 million.

I tried to get a meeting with Dr. Robert Witt, UA's president. I first met with Paul Bryant Jr. in his office and told him what we had to have. He said the university doesn't have the money. I reminded him of its \$2 billion endowment fund. I also noted its campaign to raise \$500 million for future development. (That campaign just ended, raking in \$627 million.) Bryant said he would arrange a meeting for me with Dr. Witt. That was never done.

The university, in recent years, built a single building a stone's throw from Bryce Hospital. Its price tag was \$100 million. Oh, the games that people play.

All of this discussion about the university's needs and the mental health department's responsibility to the mentally ill and retarded has been going on for months without a peep from the general public or Tuscaloosa County's lawmakers.

Now, Tuscaloosa legislators are talking, but they're saying all the wrong things. A reporter called me last week and asked me if a possible move to Birmingham was merely a "bluff" on the board's part. That's an insult. We're not playing poker. We are dealing with lives of sick people, more than 650 jobs in Tuscaloosa, millions of payroll dollars and millions more in goods and services purchased there — all because of the stubborn and unreasonable stance of the University of Alabama.

We're probably within \$25 million in reaching a fair sale with the University. \$25 million. Which is maybe the cost of two or three skyboxes at Bryant-Denny Stadium. Right now, the university is spending several million in acquiring a prime spot on University Boulevard to build a parking lot for the massive motor homes which arrive for the five or six home football games each year. Remember, as stated in the first paragraph, the university's first priority is football. Riding into the city, Bryant-Denny appears on the horizon as a giant space craft which has landed on campus.

Where will all of this end? I don't have the slightest idea. I have written about Bryce and Partlow for more than 40 years. I helped the late George Dean with a lawsuit filed in federal court over the neglect of patients under state control. That suit resulted in massive changes in the hospital and has served as a model for reform across the nation. I was in federal court just a few years ago, with Gov. Riley, when a federal court finally dismissed — after 30 years — that lawsuit. Thirty years!

I met last week with one of the nation's foremost civil rights attorneys about asking the court to reopen that case or file another one to stop another grave injustice to those in mental hospitals who have no vice.

Why do we always have to turn to the federal courts to handle all of Alabama's real problems? The University of Alabama knows all about federal courts. It was their schoolhouse door in which Gov. George Wallace stood to block black students from getting a quality education.

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