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State expects to turn over Bryce Hospital grounds to University of Alabama by June

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The Alabama Department of Mental health hopes to move into the new Bryce Hospital facility by early June, completing the move from the hospital's historic grounds that were purchased in 2010 by the University of Alabama.

Staff graphic | Anthony Bratina | The Tuscaloosa News

The University of Alabama has drawn up a campus plan for the Bryce area. Shown are the proposed structures.

David Jackson, chief operating officer for the mental health department, estimated the state would complete a phased move to the new facility by the first week of June. The department expects to make the move to the new facility over a couple of months, with the patients being the last to move, he said.

The state will continue to lease the Mary Starke Harper Geriatric Psychiatry Center, located on the northeast side of the property, from the university.

UA purchased the Bryce property from the state in 2010, paying nearly \$77 million for the 168 acres on the northeast side of campus and agreeing to pay another \$10 million for environmental cleanup and historic preservation as part of an agreement with the state.

As part of the deal, UA agreed to manage construction of the new hospital on the W.D. Partlow Developmental Center campus in Tuscaloosa and preserve the original Bryce building.

The new 268,000-square-foot hospital is expected to cost approximately \$80 million, Jackson said. There are no definite plans for the rest of the Partlow grounds at the moment. Partlow closed in late 2011 after the last of the patients living at the center moved into community home.

The university's campus master plan proposes using the old Bryce grounds for new academic and residential buildings and recreational facilities while also preserving the green space of the main lawn.

Plans for the hospital campus remain largely driven by the availability of funding, said Tim Leopard, UA's assistant vice president for construction. The financial challenge for the university remains the cost of updating the aging buildings to current codes and for use in the university system, he said.

Leopard said UA has not officially decided exactly what will go into the original hospital, though as part of the agreement space in the building will be set aside for a museum. The master plan suggestions include possible uses as a welcome center, cultural center and performing arts center in addition to the museum collection.

The university is already occupying some of the buildings on the old hospital grounds and gradually taking possession of others.

Jackson said the department has already turned over a lot of the Bryce property to the university.

“There is not a lot that remains to turn over,” he said.

The university took possession of the Alice Kidd buildings on the southeastern end of the property soon after the purchase, Leopard said. The buildings house the Environmental Health and Safety Department, the Office of Student Media, and the Theater and Dance Set Design Studio. There are no plans yet for the Kidd cafeteria, Leopard said. The Bryant Jordan Chapel has been converted into a performing arts studio.

While parts of the nearby former women's admission building have been used for storage, no plans have been confirmed for the structure, Leopard said.

The Barnes Education Center at Bryce, which UA took over in mid-February, will house the College of Education Multiple Abilities Program and some other College of Education units. Plans are still being finalized for the Medical Arts Building, according to UA.

On the west side of the property, UA plans to renovate the old paint shop building that sits adjacent to the Searcy building, which has already undergone renovations. Leopard said there are no specific plans at the moment for the buildings.

Some of the old buildings and outlying structures north of the historic hospital will be demolished to make way for roads that will bisect the grounds, connecting the eastern part of campus to Jack Warner Parkway.

The plans for the new roads, which will be named North Campus Way and Peter Bryce Boulevard and built with federal funds administered by the state highway department, are still working their way through federal approvals, Leopard said. As part of the Alabama Transportation Rehabilitation and Improvement Program, the state awarded UA approximately \$16 million in 2013 for the \$25.1-million project. UA will have to provide the remaining \$9 million for the project.

Earlier this month, the trustees approved a preliminary budget and beginning planning for a \$31.4 million academic building to be located on the Bryce property across from Shelby Hall near the planned intersection of Hackberry Lane and Peter Bryce Boulevard.

At the main property entrance on Campus Drive, the university plans to demolish the white obelisks that form the gateway and raise the road grade of Bryce Lawn Drive. There are also plans for sidewalks and landscaping as the hospital grounds are integrated into campus.

To the east, UA will use the recently acquired Bryce east property to accommodate storm water management structures currently on the university side of McFarland Boulevard. The university plans more parking at the site of the existing storm water outfall that borders the lots on the northeastern side of Campus Drive, Leopard said.

The system's board of trustees approved an agreement to buy the 26 acres of wooded property known as Bryce East in September 2013 for \$1.13 million. The property is adjacent to the main hospital grounds on the other side of McFarland Boulevard. The university's recreation department is looking at the possibility of installing a rope course on the property, Leopard said.

A grass field at the eastern edge of the hospital property that is currently used for construction worker parking will be the site of recreational softball fields, Leopard said.

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