

## **EDITORIAL: Mental health plan is good, but it has a deadline**

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Jim Perdue has a plan. If done right, it could greatly benefit Tuscaloosa, Tuscaloosa County, the University of Alabama, the state's taxpayers and those who suffer from mental illness. But the plan likely has an expiration date.

Perdue is the state's mental health commissioner. He calls his plan the "One Campus" plan. It would bring about 150 good jobs to Tuscaloosa, consolidate services, improve efficiencies and improve the quality of care given to patients.

But for the plan to unfold, it will require the cooperation of the university, the city and the county. And the deal needs to be cut before Robert Bentley leaves the governor's office. Bentley could be impeached, some predict as early as this spring, or he could finish out his term in office. But whenever he leaves, a new governor is likely to name a new Cabinet and it is unlikely Perdue will continue to serve the new governor.

Perdue wants to consolidate most of the state's mental health services into a single campus at the new Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa. The plan would take decades to unfold.

The University of Alabama purchased the old, historic Bryce Hospital next to campus from the Alabama Department of Mental Health. The university also owns the new Bryce Hospital on the Partlow grounds, the Taylor Hardin Secure Medical Facility and the Mary Starke Harper Center in Tuscaloosa and leases

these facilities back to ADMH. Meanwhile, ADMH also rents, at a cost of about \$1.2 million, space for administrative offices in the RSA tower in Montgomery. This plan would bring most of those jobs to Tuscaloosa.

"You can't have efficiency in management when you are 100 miles from the employees," Perdue said.

If the bulk of the care is given in the three Tuscaloosa facilities, it only makes sense to have the administrative offices here also.

Perdue hopes the plan can free up existing funds so ADMH can improve care for patients.

"I am convinced the Legislature is not going to raise taxes or fees or pass a lottery," Perdue said. "If you don't raise your revenue stream, you have to be innovative in other ways to accomplish it."

Meanwhile, ADMH also owns nearly 15,000 acres of land statewide, including about 6,000 acres in Tuscaloosa County. One of those locations is the property where the University Mall sits on McFarland Boulevard.

For the plan to come together, there will have to be a land swap involving ADMH, the university, the city and the county. Getting four large bureaucracies to agree on anything that large is a long shot, especially when the plan has to come together quickly. But hats off to Perdue for being creative and trying to build something positive for all involved, particularly the taxpayers. That kind of effort requires more than knowledge. It also requires passion and a willingness to innovate.

That's good business. That's good government.



