National Guard could take over former mental hospital in Decatur

By Mary Sell Montgomery Bureau   Jan 6, 2017

MONTGOMERY — The former North Alabama Regional Hospital property in Decatur may become part of a planned Alabama National Guard training facility.

Alabama National Guard leadership and Alabama Department of Mental Health officials will meet next week to discuss the possibility of transferring ownership of the hospital, a Guard spokeswoman said this week.

“At this point, a final decision has not been made on this matter, but the possibility does exist for this transfer,” Lt. Col. Shannon Hancock said.

Once a final decision has been made, more information will be available, she said.

Mental Health Commissioner James Perdue was not available for comment.

Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, said he’s been working with leaders in the Guard and mental health and has been told the property transfer could happen sometime in the first quarter of the year.

The National Guard’s use of the former hospital would be in addition to its plans to turn the former Lurleen B. Wallace Development Center into a multistate regional National Guard training center. Officials announced in 2013 the Guard will spend $14 million in federal funds to transform the 160 acres into a training facility and to re-invest in the Guard’s existing facility on Beltline Road.

The nearby hospital facility could be used to house guard members, Orr said.

He said President-elect Donald Trump has pledged to increase defense funding and training is an integral part of a strong military.

Orr said the plans are good news for the area.

“Because they have this enhanced capacity, it will bring more trainees to the area, which would be good for the local economy,” he said.

North Alabama Regional Hospital closed to patients in June 2015. The hospital on U.S. 31 served the mentally ill for 38 years.

The 74-bed, 150-employee facility cost the state about $11 million a year to run. Saving money, federal directives to get patients out of large institutions and a declining demand for beds in the hospital were reasons for the closing.

Mental health patients committed by probate courts in the Tennessee Valley are now sent to smaller crisis centers in other counties.
Law enforcement officials have said an increase in their interactions with mentally ill inmates is in part a result of the closing of mental health treatment facilities across the state and locally. Local and state funding for such facilities has been cut or eliminated, in part to save on expenses. Access to counseling and other preventive treatment also is declining.

mary.sell@decaturdaily.com. Twitter @DD_MarySell.