

LOCAL

City pushes ahead with hospital sale to FSU as public asks commission to slow down



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Updated Oct. 23, 2025, 7:46 a.m. ET

The city is taking the next step to effectively sell Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare to Florida State University even after community members pleaded with commissioners to slow down the process and get more information.

In a predictable 3-2 vote, Mayor John Dailey and City Commissioners Dianne Williams-Cox and Curtis Richardson voted to approve a third and final public hearing on the promising but rocky partnership between TMH and FSU. In the meantime, the city manager was authorized to hammer out an agreeable price for the transfer of the hospital land and its assets to FSU.

City Manager Reese Goad and his team have already been working with FSU President Richard McCullough and other university officials to strike a deal, and they will take all the time they need to do so, Goad said.

The city opted to move forward even amid great uncertainty. TMH officials say they haven't been involved in a city appraisal that sought to put a price on the hospital.

McCullough, meanwhile, said he has hammered out separate Memorandum of Understandings with Florida A&M University and Tallahassee State College to give the institutions a seat on the board after they were largely excluded from the agreement. But the deals, which are unsigned and were not available to the

commission or the public, have already [drawn concern from TMH leaders](#), who insist on maintaining “community control” of the board over academic or political appointees.

Many residents urge commission to slow down

Before the city gave the green light to creating an academic medical center that is aimed at propelling Tallahassee healthcare forward and [giving patients more treatment options](#), residents had their turn. They shared strong opinions about how the city should proceed.

A parade of more than two dozen speakers stood before the commission Oct. 22 mostly airing concerns, but some offering support for the deal on the table.

"We cannot jump into this without understanding the big picture," one speaker said in opposition to the partnership.

Another speaker worried that the governor could sell or meddle in hospital operations.

"If this sounds far fetched or even paranoid," she said, "did you imagine ten years ago that Florida would have a surgeon general who doesn't believe in childhood immunizations?"

Some offered full-throated support for any hospital model that might one day ensure Tallahasseeans don't have to drive hundreds of miles for specialized treatments.

"I've seen the power of collaboration, when universities, hospitals and communities work together," another said in support of the parties moving forward. "It doesn't just change health systems, it changes lives."

Others said they were for the partnership and advancing healthcare in the capital city, but agreed that all the parties needed to take their time and be more

transparent, as the community still has many lingering questions and fears, particularly about the state's involvement under FSU ownership.

Richardson says FSU is not a 'boogeyman,' but Matlow says 'everything was done the wrong way'

Williams-Cox immediately noted the public's apprehension, but said it was non-productive.

"I'm sitting here listening, and one word that comes to mind ... is fear," she said. "Let me just give you a couple of two or three quotes. Spencer Johnson, 'the fear you let build up in your mind is worse than the situation that actually exists.' "

Williams-Cox lamented speakers' fears and distrust of the government and said they ought to [read the Memorandum of Understanding](#) between FSU and TMH because it answers most of the questions people brought before the commission Wednesday night.

Tallahassee and the greater Big Bend area deserve good healthcare, she said, and people need to have faith that leaders are acting in the community's best interest.

"It's not going to start tomorrow, but if we don't start now, we're not going to get there," she said.

Richardson echoed Williams-Cox, saying it is up to the public to do their homework on the MOU. He also further said that there wasn't any collusion and everything [has been done transparently](#).

Since hints of the sale launched into headlines, allegations of the mayor, city manager and FSU orchestrating a ["hostile takeover of the hospital"](#) swirled. People, including TMH leaders, questioned ["secret meetings"](#) between the city and FSU, leading the [hospital to feel "blindsided"](#) when the sale was first announced.

"They haven't been the boogeyman that we've tried to make it appear that they are," Richardson said of FSU.

He acknowledged that the deal on the table wasn't perfect but also pointed out [UF Health Shands](#), which has been a major point of comparison during negotiations, likely didn't start out offering the robust services of care that it does today.

On the other side, Matlow and Porter raised numerous questions about the status of the deal and its pending future, sharing the concerns that residents articulated during the meeting.

"This whole process, the way it's unfolded, we had a great opportunity to build trust in this conversation ... but frankly, everything was done the wrong way," Matlow said.

He noted negotiations that occurred months before they were made known to the commission or public, referencing an investigation published in the [Tallahassee Democrat revealing Goad](#) got a price estimate for the hospital behind the scenes just days after talks of a sale became public.

Separate MOUs lead to confusion, contradictions

Matlow also asked about how the MOU is or will be affected by [adding Florida A&M University and Tallahassee State College](#) to the mix.

McCullough said university and hospital officials have been meeting over the last two weeks and hammering out separate MOUs.

He told commissioners FAMU "will have a board seat on day one and in the third year we will ask them to provide a list of people that they would like to see on the board, and we will work with them to pick somebody to be on that board."

"The same thing was agreed upon that the same thing would happen on the TMH side for Tallahassee State College," he said. "We don't have those MOUs signed so it's not completely nailed down, but I'm telling you that we have something that looks like it's going to work."

Later, TMH Board treasurer Cissy Proctor read a statement that directly contradicted what McCullough said moments earlier.

"At this time our board of directors has not made any commitment regarding adding academic seats with the community designated positions on the TMH board. We recognize TSC is a vital part of healthcare delivery in our region and are in active discussions to ensure their perspective and voice are represented on matters specific to their institutions," Proctor said. "Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare has a long history of collaboration with our higher education partners and we remain committed to a governance structure that keeps the majority of decisions under local community leadership."

Porter, noting other academic medical center partnerships [that don't rely on ownership](#), asked if TMH and FSU would still pursue the partnership if the city chose not to sell the hospital, to which McCullough responded no.

"We would dial back to a transactional relationship that we've had with TMH," he said.

Porter said she didn't feel comfortable moving forward with so many unknowns and questions still hanging in the air: "I disagree that you should just read the MOU and you'd have all your questions answered. The MOU is just the bare bones, a starting place."

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