

“Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum” offends some disability advocates **By Scott Finn**

Studio lead: Last August, a Morgantown contractor paid \$1.5M for the old Weston State Hospital and its 300-some acres. The hospital’s new operators hope to someday have a casino on the property. They’re also planning a series of mudbog races for trucks. But it’s the hospital’s new name that’s generating the most noise. It’s now called the Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum, which was the hospital’s name in the 19th century. Some advocates for people with disabilities are upset with the name and are demanding it be changed. Those groups include the WV Mental Health Consumers Association, the Statewide Independent Living Council, and Valley Healthcare System. Scott Finn reports.

Finn: No one denies that the former mental hospital in Weston was originally called the Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum. But when the new owners said they were reviving the name, disability advocate Scott Miller says they crossed the line.

Miller: It’s one thing to say yes, that was the name of it when it was built. But to call it that now is saying, all of the reasons why it was changed are flushed down the toilet.

Finn: Weston State Hospital closed in 1994. Miller says its former patients are upset by the name change.

Miller: One of the people there had actually lived at Weston, and he was crying. And it really struck me how it was really affecting people who were alive, who had the experience of living there.

Finn: But the owners have no plans to change it back. Ed Gleason, the project’s historical advisor, says to do so would be to change history.

Gleason: What I’m saying is that in America, we look to tell history as it was, blemishes and all. Names like that were what was used. We can’t change the past and invent it to fit what is currently easy on the ears.

Finn: Besides having a master’s degree in history, how did Gleason become the project’s historical advisor?

Gleason: Through my girlfriend, Rebecca Jordan, whose father owns the company that purchased the company.

Finn: In an earlier interview, Jordan explained why they changed the name.

Jordan: It’s not really the shock value, but it sounds better, and its getting a lot of attention, when people hear asylum, it grabs you just a little bit more than Weston State Hospital.

Finn: Former state archivist Fred Armstrong says that these decisions are tough for historians to make. But the new owners would have a better case for historical accuracy -- if they weren’t trying to host weekly “mud-bog” events for trucks on the hospital grounds.

Armstrong: A mud bog event in a historical site, to me, using it for that purpose, just as when it was used for paintball, I found it to be offensive.

Finn: If environmental regulators approve, the mud-bog races could start at the hospital as early as May. In the meantime, the new owners have opened the facility for tours – under the old name.

For West Virginia Public Broadcasting, I’m Scott Finn in Charleston.