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Clock is ticking on local health debate

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A 60-day period, starting now.

That's all that's needed, and that's all that should be accommodated in our community's great health care debate – and it is all about money – over the sale by the **Jewish Foundation of Cincinnati** of **Jewish Hospital** to Cincinnati-based **Catholic Healthcare Partners**, owner of the Mercy hospitals here.

By Feb. 1, the **University of Cincinnati** should deliver terms on how to integrate Jewish and its soon-to-be-sister Mercy hospitals into the **UC Academic Health Center**, which includes **University Hospital**, the **UC College of Medicine** and **UC Physicians**.

The proposal shouldn't seek to stop the Jewish acquisition, nor should it stop with Mercy. CEOs from **TriHealth** (owner of Good Samaritan and Bethesda hospitals), **Atrium Medical Center** in Middletown, **St. Elizabeth Healthcare** and **Christ Hospital** should all be asked by that date to re-commit to business arrangements they have with University or begin exploring new ones.

This is not intended to be "Health Alliance II," in the wake of the unwinding of the alliance and likely layoff of the remaining 800 employees and transition of its services over the next year. But it should be alliance-like, because almost no one disagrees that the UC health complex is a rich resource.

But where very reasonable people in our community seem to disagree is whether the UC health complex can stand on its own with

appropriate partnerships, or whether it is destined to lose quality and value to our community if it is not at the center of and in control of a fully integrated health system.

University is among Cincinnati's most profitable hospitals, even after it spends millions supporting the medical school and paying for care for those who can't afford to pay. But it has deferred millions in badly needed capital improvements and is saddled with an unprofitable new hospital in West Chester, which it should sell to **Fort Hamilton Hospital**. (Fort Hamilton plans to exit the Alliance.) Even with the West Chester facility sale, UC still needs big resources from our region's hospitals to improve its prospects and become a Top 25 health complex.

That 60-day period is what former Federated Department Stores CEO James Zimmerman, an adviser to UC, suggested in an editorial board meeting with the Business Courier. "We don't need a delay; we need to hurry up," he said. CHP CEO Michael Connelly told the board he would agree to postpone the acquisition until after Feb. 1 (CHP could complete it as soon as Jan. 7), as long as UC doesn't try to seek further delays.

This drama's end boils down to the ability of Dr. David Stern, dean of the UC medical college and vice president of UC's health affairs, to quickly outline a vision for UC health that's financially viable to the UC board of trustees, Jewish's current and future owners and the region's other hospitals. It's a tall order for Stern – who has had to deal with changing leadership at UC – and now for his new boss, UC President Gregory Williams. How this duo compromises will dictate Stern's reputation and determine whether UC made the right decision in picking Williams to replace Nancy Zimpher.

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