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## West Chester med center jewel and burden

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Amid the hubbub surrounding University Hospital in Corryville and Jewish Hospital in Kenwood, the key to the immediate futures of both hospitals could sit 20 miles north in West Chester.

There, overlooking Interstate 75, gleams West Chester Medical Center, which the Health Alliance of Greater Cincinnati opened in May.

If Jewish succeeds in merging with Mercy Health Partners, it should mean the end of the Health Alliance, once the region's biggest hospital system. That will leave University Hospital on its own and, supporters say, unable to maintain its physical plant or its safety-net mission.

To leaders of the Jewish Foundation of Cincinnati, the owners of Jewish Hospital, the solution is simple: Sell West Chester. It holds no debt and is well-positioned in the region's fastest-growing marketplace, but is costing the system tens of millions of dollars in start-up losses. What could be more obvious?

West Chester is expected to turn profitable in three to five years and fill the cash-cow role for the entire system. It's also at the hub of a series of medical offices and outpatient facilities that draw both patients and doctors.

But in the interim, the rest of the Health Alliance hospitals are paying the bills.

The \$225 million, 160-bed hospital still is "a financial drain on the alliance," Jewish Hospital's Myles Lash told Cincinnati City Council members at a public hearing last week. He claimed Jewish Hospital is not financing University Hospital's indigent-care functions, but instead the start-up losses at West Chester.

Predictably, executives at University Hospital and the University of Cincinnati beg to differ. They call West Chester a critical piece of the system they still hope they can keep together.

"What we're looking for is to recreate and maintain a system," says David Stern, dean of UC's College of Medicine.

If West Chester ever is put up for sale, there would be no shortage of suitors. TriHealth, the owner of Bethesda North and Good Samaritan hospitals, is sitting there watching the Health Alliance break up. The company wouldn't comment on any acquisitions but said it's always on the lookout for market opportunities.

In cocktail-party whispers, another intriguing local possibility is Christ Hospital, which formerly filled that cash-cow role but withdrew from the Health Alliance last year.

It's well-established in the urban core and well-financed.

For those who lived through the bruising three-year battle that resulted in Christ's departure from the Health Alliance, the irony would run pretty thick.

But if there's money to be made, irony is a small price to pay.