



ACT Govt postpones bid to buy Calvary

By Victor Violante
Chief Assembly Reporter

The ACT Government has postponed its bid to buy Calvary Hospital as the approval processes within the Legislative Assembly and the Catholic Church drag out.

ACT Health Minister Katy Gallagher had hoped to introduce legislation in the Assembly next month authorising the purchase of the public hospital from the Little Company of Mary Health Care for \$77 million and the sale of the Clare Holland House hospice to the company for \$9 million.

But stronger-than-expected opposition from sectors of the community and the ACT Greens over the sale of the hospice prompted Ms Gallagher to announce yesterday the legislation was now several months away.

The deal also requires the approval of the Little Company of Mary religious order, based in London, and the Vatican, a process which could take several months and which could also meet some resistance.

Canberra and Goulburn Arch-

bishop Mark Coleridge has previously declared his opposition to the deal, and it is his advice that Pope Benedict XVI will seek before making a decision. "I've had a re-think of that approach [bringing the legislation forward in February] and think that the best way forward now is ... that we allow the church processes to go through their processes prior to bringing an appropriation Bill to the Assembly," Ms Gallagher said yesterday.

"If we introduce an appropriation Bill, debate it and have an estimates process where I'm questioned and then ultimately the church process doesn't support the sale going ahead, that would leave us with an appropriation Bill before the Assembly that wouldn't need to be there."

Greens health spokeswoman Amanda Bresnan said her party's position had not changed in relation to its opposition of the sale of the hospice, a view shared by the ACT Palliative Care Society.

One change Ms Gallagher announced to the proposal was that legislation for the purchase of the hospital would no longer include

the sale of the hospice. However, the sale of the hospice would occur immediately after the Bill passed.

But Ms Bresnan said the two aspects of the deal were still linked because one was dependent on the other, and on that basis the Greens would not support the appropriation under the present proposal.

"In terms of separating the Bill in the Assembly, we don't think that changes the situation," Ms Bresnan said.

"We know, obviously, the two are tied together, so separating the hospice from the Bill doesn't really change the situation."

Ms Gallagher has argued for the need to buy the hospital in order to make a significant capital investment to it in the order of some \$200 million in the coming years without affecting the ACT budget as it would be a "budget-neutral" transaction.

Although the sale would now not occur before the 2010-11 budget is handed down in May, Ms Gallagher said yesterday the Government would have to make some capital investment in Calvary Hospital in the budget.