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Barnes's long road to Philadelphia

By Julia M. Klein

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PHILADELPHIA For officials at the deficit-ridden Barnes Foundation, a judge's ruling last month that it could finally move its extraordinary art collection from suburban Merion to downtown Philadelphia seemed an unalloyed victory in its struggle for survival.

And while Merion residents and many art lovers lamented the impending loss of a charmingly intimate place to savor masterworks, officials here exulted in the prospect of a windfall for tourism and economic development.

"I keep calling it the Museum Mile," said Stephanie Naidoff, the city's commerce director, who envisions the Barnes taking its place alongside the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Rodin Museum, a possible Calder Museum and other institutions on a revitalized Benjamin Franklin Parkway. "The potential for our tourism marketing effort having a real shot in the arm is just great."

Yet even with the enthusiastic support of local politicians and power brokers, formidable challenges lie ahead for the foundation, founded as a school by Albert Barnes, a wealthy medicine manufacturer, and filled with idiosyncratic arrangements of 19th- and 20th-century French paintings, African sculpture, Pennsylvania German furniture and other objects. The total collection - including 181 works by Renoir, 69 by Cézanne and 46 by Picasso - is worth more than \$25 billion, officials at the Barnes said.

In the months to come, the Barnes must collect \$100 million worth of capital pledges, raise at least \$50 million more for an endowment and figure out how to cover its interim operating costs. And while stepping up its fund-raising, the foundation must select an architect and decide how to continue its educational mission.

A year ago the foundation won the court's permission to expand its five-member board (reduced to four by a recent death) to 15 members.

[On Friday the foundation announced that it had named five people to the board, The Associated Press reported. One of the new board members is Harold Doley Jr., founder of Doley Securities, the oldest black-owned investment banking firm in the United States; another is Neil Rudenstine, president of Harvard from 1991 to 2001.]

Watson said the rest of the board would be chosen by the end of March.

Last week a possible obstacle was thrown in the foundation's path when a Barnes student, Jay Raymond, filed an appeal of the decision by Judge Stanley Ott of Montgomery County Orphans' Court to allow the move. Raymond, 50, who also works as a handyman and has taught at the Barnes, said his aim was "to save a cultural jewel from cultural homogenization." The lawyer for the Barnes, Ralph Wellington, said he was confident that the judge's ruling, which amended Barnes's written instructions that nothing in the collection be moved after his death, would stand.

If it does, the Barnes - which has battled to keep its Merion operation afloat through more than a decade of ruinous litigation, questionable management and squabbling - will face the task of operating at three different sites.

In addition to building a 120,000- to 150,000-square-foot, or 11,000- to 14,000-square-meter, museum here, the Barnes intends to maintain its arboretum in Merion. It also plans to open a research center there, and convert Ker-Feal, Barnes's crumbling Chester County estate, into a living-history museum. Crucial to the plan is increasing donations from about \$16,000 this past year to \$4.25 million, a goal that even the institution's own fund-raising expert, James Callahan Jr., called "ambitious."

Adrian Ellis, a New York-based strategic consultant for arts organizations who has followed the Barnes battle, said: "There's a sort of systemic optimism in the way that people plan these things."

To make way for the Barnes, the city of Philadelphia has promised, by year's end, to raze a juvenile detention center between the Rodin Museum and a planned Moshe Safdie expansion of the Central Library of the Free Library of Philadelphia. Bernard Watson, chairman of the Barnes, said a reconstituted gallery could open by late 2007 or early 2008. "That's what my aim would be," he said.

Asked about Watson's timetable, Kimberly Camp, the foundation's executive director and chief executive, said, "I wouldn't pay attention to that if I were you." She added, "It's more important that we do it right than that we do it fast."

The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Lenfest and Annenberg Foundations are leading a fund-raising drive that has raised \$100 million for the new building and the move. Still needed is a minimum of \$50 million for an endowment. The foundations suspended fund-raising while awaiting Ott's ruling, said Rebecca Rimel, Pew's president and chief executive, because the gifts were granted on the condition that public access to the Barnes be improved. Now the fund-raisers are "eager to get on with things," she said.

"We've got to get the best minds, the best talent," she continued. "It has got to be spectacular."

The Barnes has an annual operating deficit of about \$1.2 million. Since the judge's decision, requests for visits have more than doubled, the foundation says. But that will not help finances, since the Barnes already sells out its 1,200 weekly slots for visits, available by reservation only. (The current cost is \$5 a ticket; admission is likely to double with the planned move.)

And despite the talk of millions of dollars raised, "I haven't seen a check," Camp said. She added: "My biggest concern right now is operating money for 2005. People forget this is a working, breathing organization. We need money now. Our finances are already severely strained." While most organizations stabilize their finances before opening a capital campaign, "we have not had that luxury," Camp said.

Nancy Burd, a senior vice president of the Nonprofit Finance Fund in New York, which advises nonprofit organizations on capital projects, predicted that the Barnes would need to raise substantially more money than it has projected so far. "I don't believe 150 million is the number if the number includes a break-even budget," she said. "Where is the annual giving coming from in the early years? That's not to say there is no capacity in this community. I don't think they're giving it enough time."

Anne Hawley, director of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, which is planning a new building by the architect Renzo Piano, suggested that a curator and an architect needed to work together to preserve Barnes's vision. "It's one of the toughest projects I can imagine," she said. "To spend all this money and not get it right would be just a tragedy for the Barnes and the collection."

Wellington, the Barnes's lawyer, said the foundation was legally bound to replicate Barnes's distinctive arrangements of artworks, which he considered important to his educational method.