

Main Line Life

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Latest plan for Barnes is rejected

By Cheryl Allison

Lower Merion raises limits on daily visitors, but foundation says it's still not enough to avoid move. The Barnes Foundation has politely but firmly rebuffed a move by Lower Merion Township to open its doors to more visitors, saying that it's too little, too late to forestall a move to Philadelphia.

One day after the board of commissioners voted to adopt an ordinance raising limits on daily visitors, Derek Gillman, Barnes executive director, issued a statement saying that the increased revenues that might be realized "will not be sufficient to alter in a substantial way the adverse economic situation that caused our board of trustees to seek permission to move the gallery art collection."

"We welcome this increased latitude from the commissioners," Gillman said, adding, "We look forward to widening access to the arboretum and developing our horticultural programs" without referring to increases in admissions to the gallery in Merion.

"We also welcome improved relations with our neighbors and community in Montgomery County," he said. But he went on to explain that the foundation received court permission to alter founder Dr. Albert C. Barnes's will in 2004 after lengthy litigation and hearings.

"The foundation's board of trustees believes," Gillman said, "that there is neither a legal basis nor a financial justification for reversing these settled and well-reasoned decisions."

The ordinance, which was adopted on a unanimous vote July 18, more generally addresses admissions to galleries or museums connected with educational institutions in the township. It has to be general to avoid a taint of spot zoning.

That generality was a source of some concern early on, since the increased numbers will now be a matter of right for such institutions.

But there's no question it was intended by its sponsor, Merion Commissioner Brian Gordon, to assist the Barnes. More than doubling existing limits of 400 visitors three days a week to 450 six days a week, the new regulation could increase yearly admissions to 140,400, or 171,600 if school visits are included. At the current price of admission of \$10, ticket proceeds would gross \$1.7 million per year.

If those revenues were combined with an endowment created through a \$50 million bond from Montgomery County to purchase the Barnes properties and lease them back to the

organization, members of the organization Friends of the Barnes Foundation say there would be no need to move the art.

From more contentious times, Lower Merion's restrictions have been seen as an obstacle to wider access to Albert Barnes's great collection.

"There were bruising fights that should be acknowledged. Everyone walked away somewhat wounded," Gordon said at the commissioners meeting last week. But, "the overwhelming thrust of this [ordinance] is the desire of the Barnes neighbors to meet the institution's needs. It has a desire to grow, and that can be accommodated through this ordinance."

In a later interview, Gordon said the legislation was structured "to give [the Barnes] the unfettered right for an immediate increase" in attendance.

Neighbors last week supported increased admissions. Latches Lane neighbor Steven Asher said the ordinance was the result of "endeavors to mediate between two important values: [maintaining] the residential environment and creating an environment where the Barnes is free to stay here and expand visitation. The general feeling among neighbors is that [these increases] meet both goals."

Wynnewood resident Joan Hindin urged the board to do what it could to prevent the move. "This is not right. You know it's not right, and people all over the world know it's not right," she said.

Told of Gillman's statement, Friends of the Barnes member Nancy Herman said revenues from new admissions "may not cover" the Barnes's deficits, but "would go a long way."

"The increased access does address their often repeated mantra that the Barnes could be seen by more people in Philadelphia," she pointed out.

"Their refusal to accept these offers," she remarked, "reminds me of someone who has fallen in the ocean saying they would rather swim to shore many miles away than accept a hand from the boat, crying, 'It's too late. You let me fall in.'"