

The Evening Bulletin

Barnes Moves To A Standstill

by Jim McCaffrey

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Philadelphia - It looks like it could be one step forward and two steps back for the Barnes Foundation.

Yesterday, a joint committee of City Council unanimously recommended an ordinance that would allow the demolition of the city's Youth Studies Center by May 2008. The leasing of the property on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway to the Barnes Foundation would follow so it can build a facility to house its \$30 billion art collection.

At the end of the meeting, opponents of the Barnes move from Lower Merion Township into Philadelphia vowed they would soon join with Montgomery County in legal actions designed to prevent the collection from ever leaving the township.

If Albert Barnes' ghost could have haunted yesterday's committee hearing, he would have been angrier than Jacob Marley in a chain-link factory.

Many of the groups he considered to be made up of uninformed art dilettantes, the groups that mocked his collection and rejected his overtures, were at City Council eager to acquire his collection for the city. These representatives included two representatives from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, a fine-arts organization that history records understood little or nothing of his collection when he was putting it together and whose trustees Barnes was dedicated to keeping from seeing what he had bought.

They also included administrators from the Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau and the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce.

If there was one group of people Barnes hated like vermin, it was tourists. His collection, he was clear, was not meant for day-trippers. He assembled it for serious students devoted to understanding the aesthetics that distinguished the great from the mundane.

Another group that bored him were the Babbits who he believed typically made up the local Chamber of Commerce. Barnes was a great civic supporter (firehouses and police stations could always count on his checks), but he had little use for small-minded businessmen who could not see value in anything that didn't promote commerce.

Wilkerson testified, "As inspiring as this project is for our hearts and minds, it is equally exciting from the perspective of economic development and the opportunity it represents to further enhance Philadelphia's reputation as a cultural destination city."

She added later in her written testimony, "Currently, more than 30 million visitors come here each year, and spend more than \$16 million a day in the five-county region while here. We can barely imagine how these numbers will swell once the Barnes is open."

That noise you may be hearing at these words is, no doubt, the specter of old Dr. Barnes wailing and gnashing his teeth.

Last, but certainly not least, of the Barnes adversaries at the hearing was the press. One of Barnes' most public feuds was with former Inquirer publisher Walter Annenberg.

Local reviews of his unparalleled collection of Impressionist paintings too often reflected more ignorance and jealousy than understanding and perception.

The Annenberg Foundation's involvement in the moving of the Barnes collection to the Parkway is one of the toughest aspects of the deal for the lovers of the Barnes collection and the Barnes ideals to accept.

The lease the committee recommended is complicated.

First the Fairmount Park director and the Commissioner of Public Property, acting for the City of Philadelphia, enter into a Master Ground Lease with the Philadelphia Authority for Industrial Development. In short, the city leases the Parkway plot where the Youth Studies Center now sits to PAID.

Then PAID will sublease the site to The Barnes Foundation.

In return the Barnes Foundation agrees to tear down the Youth Studies Center and build a new home for its art collection at no cost to the city.

The site will be leased through PAID to the Barnes for \$10.

There are actually two leases on the site.

The first lasts for four years and covers the time when the Youth Study Center is demolished. It begins the day the city vacates the YSC.

Wilkerson said she expected the city to leave the YSC sooner rather than later but she offered no guarantees. If the city is not out by May 30, 2008, the Barnes can choose to either give it more time or terminate the agreement.

The second lease gives the Barnes 99 years at the site as long as the Fairmount Park Commission and the Art Commission approve its design, as long as parking problems are addressed adequately, and as long as the foundation shows it has enough money to complete the building.

At the end of the 99 years the facility becomes city property - an interesting scenario given there presumably will be one of the world's most valuable art collections inside.

The foundation will have the right to match any offers the city receives. The city, however, is not obligated to sell at any time.

Why is PAID inserted in this lease between the city and the Barnes?

One possible answer is that PAID opens the door to grant funding for the project.

Page 11 of the sublease - the one between PAID and the Barnes - shows there is a \$25 million state grant waiting to go through the city to PAID and then into the Barnes' coffers through what the contract calls a "sub-grant" agreement.

Keep in mind that last year opponents of moving the Barnes discovered a \$107 million state appropriation earmarked for the Barnes move to Philadelphia that has not been exercised, but remains in the appropriations budget.

Meanwhile, the Barnes is busying itself in staging an international search for a firm to design the new building,

Dr. Derek Watson, president of the Barnes Board of Directors, testified the list has been narrowed to six candidates, with the selection to be announced by August.

Watson said the search committee was looking for a design to fit into the Parkway the way a building would have to be "part of the Champs-Élysée"

"We intend to be a very good neighbor," he said. "We have the most diverse board of any major art institute in America."

For its part, the city is agreeing to vacate the Youth Study Center by May 30, 2008.

That is no easy task given it has no new juvenile detention center to go to. Wilkerson admitted temporary centers would have to be found to house incarcerated juveniles until a new facility is built.

Wilkerson testified the city is negotiating for two sites to temporarily hold the offenders until a new facility is built. She estimated the cost for a temporary facility would be "\$5 million to \$7 million."

The permanent YSC facility is being considered for West Philadelphia but the councilperson representing that district, Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell, won't release the needed legislation until the city negotiates terms that satisfy residents around the proposed West Philadelphia facility.

Wilkerson testified there have been no new talks with Blackwell about the new YSC.

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