

The Philadelphia Inquirer

PhillyDeals: Elite want a new Barnes, masses are paying for it

January 16, 2011|

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For most of us who can't tell a **Cassatt** from a **Cézanne** without a guidebook or a Moore College student to light the way, the long, nasty fight over moving the late **Albert C. Barnes'** art collection from Merion to the Ben Franklin Parkway has seemed, how you say, abstract.

One learned group of art lovers insists the art should stay in the cranky old pill-pusher's suburban home, where he placed them, and as he demanded.

The others, backed by the **Pew Charitable Trust** (gasoline) and **Lenfest** (cable TV) foundations and other monied tastemakers, want to move Barnes' legacy down the street from the Art Museum, putting idle building crews to work for a season, then drawing armies of tourists to fill hotel beds and restaurant chairs.

And why not move it, if some of our most generous citizens would rather deplete their fortunes on a fancy new picture gallery, instead of just saving sick children?

The question would be less academic, if the art lovers were using piles of our money to build the museum, without asking what we think about that.

Actually, they *are* using our money.

Borrowing for Barnes

Since 2006, **Gov. Rendell** has endorsed state grants totaling \$47.45 million for construction of the new Barnes hall. (The **Delaware River Port Authority** has chipped in \$500,000 from your bridge tolls.)

That's about one-third of the cost of the new Barnes museum. Maybe more, if we discount "soft costs," such as moving the paintings, from the total \$150 million price tag.

(The new museum's backers also want to raise a \$50 million endowment to keep the place running once it's open, spokesman **Andrew Stewart** says.)

Hundreds of grants are tucked into the thick capital-budget bills approved each year by the state General Assembly, and the Barnes grants are among the larger examples. The grants reside inside hundreds of pages of projects for developers and agencies across the state, as part of the **Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program (RACP)**.

These projects are funded by Pennsylvania bond issues. That means your income and sales taxes will be paying back debt the state incurred for these projects for years to come.

Only \$9.59 million of the people's money has been signed over for the new Barnes so far.

The rest is promised under a series of letters and contracts, including \$11 million Rendell signed for RACP projects in November, after Republican **Tom Corbett** was elected to replace Democrat Rendell.

RACP requires matching funds, and Barnes only gets the money as a reimbursement, after it has been spent.

That has opponents of the new Barnes museum scheming. Corbett crusaded to cut state borrowing and spending on private projects, given the weak economy and looming deficits. Maybe Corbett will holler, "Enough!"

Evelyn Yaari and a group of her fellow Merion Barnes-lovers, who oppose the move, went to Harrisburg last week to seek help from state **Treasurer Rob McCord**. Last fall, McCord combined with **Auditor General Jack Wagner** to trim Rendell's last bond sale (which funds RACP alongside prisons, highways, and other projects) to \$600 million, from a proposed \$1 billion. It leaves Corbett to raise more when bills for Rendell's promises come due.

The treasurer's office didn't encourage Yaari's group. The deal is already "a fully funded grant agreement" among the state, the city, and the Barnes, **John Lisko**, chief of staff for McCord, told me later. "This train has left the station."

Yaari says she is still fighting. She also appealed to Wagner. But his hands are tied, said his spokesman, **Steve Halvonik**: "We have considered an audit of the Barnes Foundation, [but] we would have to wait until money has been spent. The project could be well along to completion, if not finished, before we could review and issue a report."

Victory has a thousand fathers, like my Mexican grandmother used to say. When those personally most responsible for the future home of the Barnes are standing off the Parkway taking credit, when their names are painted or carved or printed, remember, **Pennsylvanians** - you can all take credit for the new Barnes, too.

You're paying for the place.

Elite back moving the Barnes, but the masses are dealt the bill. **PhillyDeals, D3.**

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