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Montco floats new proposal to keep Barnes

by Mari A. Schaefer

Montgomery County has a proposal to keep the Barnes Foundation in Lower Merion, save the taxpayers about \$100 million and give the museum a \$50 million endowment.

And an attorney appointed by the county commissioners says all that can be done without spending a penny of taxpayers' money.

Yesterday, the attorney, Mark Schwartz, sent a letter to Barnes' board asking that it consider selling the buildings that house the world-famous collection in Merion and the grounds to Montgomery County.

The art collection would remain where it is and the Barnes would pay rent to Montgomery County by investing the profits from the sale. The county would use tax-exempt bonds to raise the money for the purchase.

"The proposal is a good one. Hopefully they will see that and we can discuss it at the table," said Thomas Jay Ellis, chairman of the county commissioners. Derek Gillman, executive director of the museum, had not yet received the proposal but said plans are "moving ahead" to move to the Benjamin Franklin Parkway and a site now occupied by the city's Youth Study Center.

The city has still to decide where it is going to relocate the juvenile-detention facility.

There is a proposal to move the facility to West Philadelphia at 48th street and Haverford Avenue, but Philadelphia Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell has refused so far to introduce needed zoning changes for the move.

The agreement between the city and the Barnes calls for the city to vacate the detention center site by May of 2008. If that is not done, the Barnes can break the lease.

"Is this the best way to spend taxpayers' money, or does Montgomery County provide a much more viable and socially effective solution that should be pursued?" said Schwartz, who pointed out the many other ways the city and state could better spend its money. In 2002, the state authorized \$100 million for the Barnes' move to Benjamin Franklin Parkway.

Schwartz said he thinks the Barnes has the "fiduciary responsibility" to enter into negotiations with Montgomery County.

But reaction in the city was decidedly cool.

"We have started the process of making that site available and will continue with due diligence of making that deadline," said Darrell L. Clarke, the City Councilman in whose district the Barnes collection would be located. Clark, who also has not seen the new proposal to keep the Barnes in Lower Merion, said the city is "excited about the new addition to the Parkway."