

“The Barnes move: What a waste”

by Nancy Herman

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In October, the Barnes Foundation had its so called 'ground breaking' event on the Parkway. One wonders as usual with all Barnes related events in recent years what is really going on.

What we know for sure is that a very large billboard is now in place on the Parkway which we have heard requires four security guards a day to patrol. What we don't know is who foot the bill for the giant ad and who will be paying for the guards for the next 3 or 4 years to keep it from becoming a graffiti artist's big chance. Barnes didn't want his paintings reproduced at all and now we have Comcast showing some version of them on digital cable and these dark reproductions advertising the demolition of his dream on the Parkway.

Forget the morality of all of this for a moment and concentrate on the wasted money. The economy is tanking. The city and state's budgets have major shortfalls. The city has given a property worth at least \$25 million to the Barnes Foundation for a dollar a year. They are not only throwing that money away but all the possible tax revenue from a commercial venture that could be on that site. A Barnes staging area with large restaurant and hotel or condo complex above would be a good alternative, for instance.

Then there is the money that is needed to temporarily house the Youth Study Center so the Barnes could finally get something happening before the swelling numbers of people who think it is a bad idea gain any more power.

So far Governor Rendell has gaily contributed \$30 million dollars to the Barnes venture, his brain child, and another \$7 million to the Parkway renovation. That renovation will do nothing to alleviate new problems of traffic, parking, and congestion created by the new Barnes. This is taxpayer money and some say must be matched by city funds.

And don't forget the great sucking sound of Foundation money as the Barnes project siphons off resources that might otherwise be available for other cultural institutions in the city. Many institutions secretly deplore this situation but, because of the power of the Pew to withhold grant money, dare not speak out.

According to the public relations machine that the Barnes has become, this will all be made up for by the great influx of tourist dollars that will flow to Philadelphia from the new Barnes Museum. This ignores completely the challenge of the annual deficit anticipated for the Parkway Barnes, which is at least \$4.5 million per year. What other institution in Philadelphia has that burden to bear and who will foot that bill?

The Barnes in Merion could have 144,000 people a year. The Barnes in Philadelphia imagines it will have 200,000. Even if that is the case, does it make any kind of financial sense to waste all this money and destroy an institution that is eligible for national historic landmark status in order to possibly accommodate 55,000 extra tourists a year

According to Inga Safron, Inquirer critic, "Barnes officials said the current turmoil in the credit markets would have no impact on their plans." They are building the project with donations and do not plan to borrow.

This is an interesting tidbit. Is the money already in place and gaining interest on some other planet? Is it simply pledged and those investors have secret information about investing that we don't know? Do they all have so much money that a million here and a million there doesn't matter?

Rebecca Rimel, CEO of the Pew, has said Pew is exiting 'stage left'. This seems an appropriate expression as the whole deal looks like a vaudeville act. But if they don't have a magician on board, it looks like there won't be any coins found behind anyone's ears if this shady heist actually occurs.

The Barnes in Merion is already a part of the cultural community of Philadelphia. That bus that sits almost empty behind the PMA could easily bring anyone who can't take the R5 or the 44 bus to Merion. It takes about 12 minutes. All tourists eat and sleep in Philadelphia and the Barnes in Merion costs the city and the state nothing. This is a giant ego trip for Rendel, Rimel, Lenfest and other contributors to the move at the moment, but they have no reason to be proud of themselves.

This quote by Christopher Knight of the LA Times says it all: "As with Penn Station four decades ago, so with the Barnes Foundation today. Fifteen or twenty years down the road, people will look back on what was lost and scratch their heads: What could Philadelphia have been thinking?"

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