

The Gloucester County Times

"Board at Barnes Foundation hopes to block move"

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CAMDEN It's one of the unique collections of art in the world, filled with paintings by renowned French Impressionists set on the grounds of a picturesque arboretum in Pennsylvania's Montgomery County.

But the artwork held at the Barnes Foundation is up for a possible move just a stone's throw over the Philadelphia city line. The relocation has been decried by art lovers, art critics and those in the community where the collection resides.

Does it matter to people in New Jersey?

A fraction of the funds to conduct the relocation is coming in part from a contribution made by the Delaware River Port Authority. DRPA Chairman John Estey said those funds are from Pennsylvania economic development money.

Board members who could potentially influence what happens to those funds include representatives from the Garden State.

The "Friends of the Barnes Foundation" went before the board of the DRPA Wednesday asking the authority to rescind the \$500,000 allocated six years ago in hopes of gaining support to block the move.

Barnes administrators have claimed that moving the collection to a space among other museums on Philadelphia's Benjamin Franklin Parkway would solve the foundation's economic woes.

Opponents of the move say it makes little sense to take break the collection from its specially designed setting amid the grounds. One opponent last week claimed that it would become a mere sideshow among the larger attractions on the Parkway.

The Barnes Foundation was established by entrepreneur Albert C. Barnes in 1922 to "promote the advancement of education and the appreciation of the fine arts" among the working man, according to the foundation Web site. Located in a twelve-acre arboretum, the Foundation is home to one of the world's largest collections of 19th and 20th Century art as well as important examples of African sculpture.

Barnes himself commissioned the design of the gallery specifically for his collection, hiring the noted French architect Paul Philippe Cret the architect of the Ben Franklin Bridge and the Rodin Museum on the Parkway to design the gallery and the attached residence, which were completed in 1925. He commissioned bas-reliefs by the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz along with tile work using African designs and themes by Enfield Pottery and Tile Works to adorn the building. He even arranged the collection to illustrate his own theories of overarching visual elements and enduring aesthetic traditions.

"To remove the art collection from Merion is quite literally to rip the guts out of the institution," Friends member Sandy Bressler said.

Bressler argued that the DRPA funds shouldn't go toward dismantling what she called a national cultural treasure and said that the proposed move isn't in the public interest.

"The Barnes is a major economic asset of Merion [Township] and Montgomery County," she said.

Fellow friend Robert Zaller condemned officials for contributing tax dollars to what he called "disastrous, absurd and pointless," and to a plan that has been "denounced from coast to coast."

An estimated \$500 million would be required to make the move happen. The Pennsylvania Legislature has earmarked \$100 million already.

Private funding has chipped in as well. All things considered, the half-million dollars from the DRPA is a drop in the bucket.

Nevertheless, "We're in the midst of a world wide depression," Zaller said. "Even if these times were flush, moving the Barnes Collection would be nothing less than the greatest theft of art since World War II. Moving it five miles or 500 miles makes no difference."

Zaller urged the DRPA to consider a motion to reverse their funding decision. Board members hearing the Friends' pleas often applauded following the testimony of the dozen or so representatives who spoke.

A spokesman for Pennsylvania Congressman Jim Gerlach on Wednesday voiced the sixth District Republican's support for keeping the Barnes' collection in its Merion gallery.

The Friends may not learn the DRPA's stance for a month.

"We're going to caucus with the board members and make sure they get all the information the Barnes people have submitted to us in addition to the materials they gave us today," Estey said following the presentation by the group.

He anticipates that, prior to the next DRPA meeting, the Friends would be advised of the board's decision.