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“Barnes Foundation fight enters Pa. politics”

A Pa. attorney-general candidate said he'd renew efforts to keep the foundation in Lower Merion.

By Nancy Petersen

John Morganelli, the Democratic candidate for Pennsylvania attorney general, said yesterday that the fight to keep the Barnes Foundation in its historical home was not over yet.

In a campaign swing through Lower Merion, Morganelli said that if elected in November, he would try to reopen a 2004 court case that authorized a move by the Barnes Foundation and its \$6 billion art collection to Philadelphia.

"To move it, in my view, should be a last resort. I don't think we're there yet," Morganelli told a small crowd of Barnes supporters in front of the museum.

He is running against the Republican incumbent, Tom Corbett, whose office oversees charitable trusts such as the Barnes Foundation.

In 2007, the Montgomery County Commissioners and the Friends of the Barnes asked that the case be reopened, saying new information had come to light. It included a plan by Montgomery County Commissioners to borrow \$50 million, buy the Lower Merion site from the foundation, then lease it back.

When comparing that offer to grants of \$150 million from foundations and other sources to help the Barnes move, Corbett said, the county's plan was "too little and too late," and Montgomery County Orphans Court Judge Stanley Ott refused to reconsider his earlier decision.

Morganelli said Corbett should have been more aggressive.

"Instead of allowing the court to reexamine the matter with the new information, Mr. Corbett chose to conclude there was no justification to reopen the case," Morganelli said. "Mr. Corbett disregarded the wishes of Dr. Barnes and the interests of this community."

The Barnes Foundation oversees what many say is the world's finest collection of Impressionist art. It is housed and displayed according to the precise instructions of the late Albert Barnes in a spacious gallery on 12 acres in a quiet neighborhood near St. Joseph's University.

But the foundation has been on shaky financial footing for years. Its move to the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, underwritten by grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Lenfest Foundation and the Annenberg Foundation, will give it more visibility, ease access for visitors and, presumably, bring in more money.

"The foundation's move has been thoroughly vetted and judicially determined to be the best available alternative," Corbett wrote in an e-mail yesterday. "It will actually enable the foundation to increase its exposure to the common people Dr. Barnes intended to reach while retaining its existing facilities to display additional artifacts that have been in storage due to a lack of gallery space."

The Barnes move has garnered widespread support from public officials, including Gov. Rendell. Rendell spokesman Gary Miller said the governor still supported the move, but did not feel that all Democratic candidates had to agree with him.

Contact staff writer Nancy Petersen at 610-696-4932 or npetersen@phillynews.com