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“Barnes Foundation: Philly home complete by '11”
by Joann Loviglio

PHILADELPHIA (AP) -- Construction of The Barnes Foundation's new downtown home is slated to be complete by the end of 2011, a timetable that comes after years of legal battles over the future of the foundation and its multibillion-dollar art collection.

Demolition of a former juvenile jail on the site is slated to begin this winter, with construction to start in fall 2009, officials announced at an event Wednesday evening. Interior work will begin after that, but no official opening date was set.

"This will give the opportunity for this collection to be seen by so many more people with so much more ease," than its longtime home in suburban Lower Merion Township, Gov. Ed Rendell said.

A demolition backhoe took a few ceremonial whacks at the shuttered jail, as confetti and fireworks shot off the balconies. Five large banners printed with full-scale reproductions of the foundation's art-covered gallery walls were unfurled along the block-long stretch of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway where the new Barnes will stand.

Opponents including a citizens group called Friends of the Barnes tried unsuccessfully to persuade Montgomery County Orphans' Court Judge Stanley Ott to reconsider a 2004 decision allowing the move. Ott has jurisdiction over Dr. Albert Barnes' trust.

Several dozen protesters on the sidewalk outside the white tented area could be heard yelling in the background throughout the event. As several hundred attendees from the city's art and philanthropic communities left, they were met with demonstrators asking them how it felt "to steal another man's property."

Friends of the Barnes member Robert Zaller called the plan "a criminal conspiracy to bring about the biggest art heist since the Second World War." He said opponents will continue to fight the relocation "until we stop it."

Mayor Michael Nutter was the only speaker to directly address the controversy. Living just blocks away from the Barnes, near the Philadelphia-Montgomery County line, he said many opponents were not always so supportive.

"For all the hooting and hollering about the prospect of the Barnes coming to the parkway, there was a lot of hooting and hollering (by its neighbors) wanting them to shut down and leave," he said to applause from the crowd.

"Sometimes you have to be a little careful what you wish for."

The Barnes Foundation said it was on the verge of bankruptcy when it sought Ott's permission to leave Lower Merion and move closer to Philadelphia's museums and cultural attractions.

The foundation said it would go broke if forced to keep its 181 Renoirs, 69 Cezannes, 60 Matisse, 44 Picassos and more in its suburban home, which was restricted under township regulations to about 400 reservation-required visitors a day, three days a week.

Barnes, a pharmaceutical magnate, established the foundation in 1922 to teach populist methods of appreciating and evaluating art. He died in a 1951 car crash, leaving behind a will instructing that his paintings "remain in exactly the places they are" after his death.

His world-renowned collection of about 800 French impressionist and postimpressionist masterpieces and hundreds of other objects is housed in a 23-room limestone mansion. Inside, Barnes grouped his paintings with objects like metal hinges and wrought ironwork as a teaching tool to illustrate common aesthetic themes.

The Barnes raised \$150 million, including a \$25 million grant from the state and millions more from five charitable foundations, to build on the parkway and establish an operating endowment.

On the Net:

Barnes Foundation: <http://www.barnesfoundation.org>

Friends of the Barnes: <http://www.barnesfriends.org>