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Barnes Foundation moves to up attendance numbers

By Cheryl Allison

Still preparing for a move to Philadelphia, the Barnes Foundation is taking a step to increase attendance at its Merion home in the meantime.

Trustees of the world-renowned art collection announced last week that they are taking advantage of a Lower Merion Township ordinance change to ease restrictions on visitation to the Latches Lane gallery and arboretum.

Township commissioners amended zoning provisions that have limited attendance at the Barnes nearly nine months ago, in August 2007. While the new regulation applies generally to museums and galleries associated with educational institutions, Lower Merion leaders clearly intended it to remove one obstacle to keeping the collection intact in the gallery founder Dr. Albert C. Barnes built for it some 80 years ago.

At the time the revision was approved, Barnes Foundation Director Derek Gillman said the easing of a cap on visitors was a "welcome" development, but "too little" to address the institution's

Commenting on the announcement of the new admissions policy, foundation spokesman Andrew Stewart said trustees discussed the opportunity recently and voted to take the township up on its offer to increase the public's access to the collection.

Effective immediately, Stewart said, the maximum number of daily visitors will be increased from 400 to 450 each day the gallery is open. The foundation will also increase the number of days it is open to the public in July and August.

Until now, the gallery and grounds have been open three days a week all year. In the two summer months, when the foundation does not conduct its art education classes, it will be open five days, Wednesday through Sunday.

Along with the increase in maximum daily visitors, the Barnes board also approved an increase in the admission fee, the first since 2005. Admission for adults will be \$12, up from \$10. Admission pricing for school groups, kindergarten through 12th grade, will remain at \$5 per person; colleges groups will still pay \$10 per person.

Under previous admission restrictions, yearly admissions were capped at 62,400, Stewart said. With the change, total potential admissions, based on three days per week 42 weeks of the year and five days per week for 10 weeks, that number would be 79,200, for an

increase of 16,800.

Although Stewart said there will be some increased costs for staffing, the additional numbers could also bring in some new revenues, although the exact amount is uncertain.

The change in admission policy came within days of a hearing in Montgomery County Orphan's Court March 24, during which attorneys for the Barnes Foundation asked Judge Stanley Ott to dismiss petitions filed by Montgomery County and the Friends of the Barnes Foundation, a group fighting the gallery move.

They have asked Ott to reopen his December 2004 decision permitting the trustees to alter Barnes, will and relocate the art.

Among other considerations, the county and the Friends have pointed to the township's ordinance change, arguing that by increasing admissions and pricing, the foundation could bring in enough new funds to stay solvent and stay at home.

In court, Barnes attorney Ralph Wellington discounted its importance as a "change in circumstance" since the ruling, saying that the township could rewrite the ordinance anytime it wished.

Township officials have said, however, that if the foundation implemented admission increases under the ordinance, it would be binding indefinitely.

Told of the Barnes announcement, Merion Commissioner Brian Gordon commented, "The timing of the implementation of the increased visitation curiously follows the conclusion of the briefing and oral argument before Judge Ott. It seems that the foundation did not wish to confirm the potential for increased revenues while the record remained open.

"But even now," he added, the foundation's small increase in ticket prices appeared to be a tepid response to the potential for revenues from ticket sales. In contrast, the Philadelphia Museum of Art charged \$24 weekdays for tickets to the Renoir landscapes [exhibit] and its regular admission is \$15.

"If trustees desired, the Barnes could prosper in Merion and retain the collection in the gallery for which it was designed," he said.

In another development this week, the foundation announced that it has filled an additional position on its expanded board, with one position remaining open. The new member is Bruce S. Gordon, a former president of the Retail Markets Group of Verizon Communications who served from 2005 to 2007 as president and CEO of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. During his tenure with the

organization, Gordon is credited with adding more than 100,000 members and associates to the NAACP.

He serves on the boards of a number of arts and cultural organizations, and has served on advisory boards for the New York Public School System and others, addressing issues of motivation and leadership for students.

"Bruce Gordon is an extraordinary addition to the Barnes Foundation Board of Trustees," said Dr. Bernard C. Watson, board chairman. "His business credentials and character are impeccable and his board experience in support of education and the arts make him well suited for this role [in which] we are very eager to engage him."