

FeedBack

More on the Schuylkill Center

Wendy Lathrop's valuable article "Where There's a Will..." [Sept. 2007] couples the Orphans' Court activities of the Barnes Foundation and the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education (SCEE). From a legal point of view the breaking of the wills makes two charities appear to be similar. But in fact the two cases are quite different.

Art, poetry and music are universal and cannot be owned by anyone totally, but are in the universal domain. Therefore, for Mr. Barnes to will his art paintings to remain in his home displayed a kind of covetousness as if these paintings could only be enjoyed under his tutelage. But art is for everyone, to be enjoyed by everyone. If the Barnes Collection were to be destroyed by fire, that would be wicked and would deny the public the enjoyment and pursuit of art. But if the paintings are simply moved to another location, are not destroyed but are protected, this should be satisfactory.

The land at the Schuylkill Center is different. The land at the Center cannot be moved. It has taken generations to grow, the brooks are only first order streams in Philadelphia and the habitat cannot be removed.

By allowing the Charter School to occupy 70% of the SCEE Visitor Center, already the Charter School has marginalized the activities of SCEE. In 2004 there were 60,000 attendees and now this has been reduced to 15,000 attendees. Forty environmental organizations have been forbidden to come, leaving 200 students in control.

What the SCEE Board is proposing to do is to destroy the habitat by developing buildings, housing police football grounds, ten acre parking lots, carpeting areas with solar panels and asphalt bike trails. This is equivalent to destroying the Barnes Foundation paintings by fire. If the above proposals take place there will be

no Nature Center, no first order streams, no Penn's Woods, and no local habitat.

In the case of the Schuylkill Center it is only the Orphans' Court that may save this precious green space so the legal position is all important to stop the habitat from being destroyed. In the case of the Barnes, the paintings are not being destroyed but simply moved to a new location.

The other major miscomprehension is that the Charter School provides a steady revenue stream for SCEE. This is not true. In fact Price Waterhouse Coopers in a brief report in March 2006 furthered figures that the net loss, after income and costs were balanced, came to \$100,000/year. A more recent report to the Board (November 2007) notes that the net loss, including depreciation, has risen to \$200,000/year. The Visitor Center building is deteriorating, and the electrical work, sewage, utilities all need repair. The fire hydrant is inoperable and there is a lack of sufficient available water. These safety and health issues are not being addressed.

It is hoped that the Orphans' Court will uphold the will of Eleanor Houston Smith to save 400 acres of wildlife habitat at the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education. It is helpful that Wendy Lathrop's article is bringing this case to the attention of the larger public.

Eleanor (Houston) Smith Morris, AICP, RTPI
Via the Internet

Lathrop Replies

Dr. Morris eloquently presents an insider's view regarding the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education. I completely agree with her that land conservation is crucial, particularly in such an urban environment as Philadelphia. To paraphrase Will Rogers' classic statement: conserve land now because they're not making any more of it.

I do not, however, entirely agree with Dr. Morris's analogy between moving the Barnes collection and the preservation of her own family's bequest, due to the

significance of the actual structure and grounds currently housing the Barnes Foundation, and the integration of art and building (the quirkiness of Dr. Barnes being a significant historical aspect). The planned move also necessitates maintenance of two sites, one for the arboretum and one for the new home for the art collection, a difficult financial situation for a struggling foundation. I claim no insight as to which, if any, of the "stay or move" arguments are superior. Financial failure in either the current or proposed new location jeopardizes the unity of the art collection as well as the arboretum's future.

I fully share Dr. Morris's concerns regarding the planned development of the Schuylkill Center site, particularly as I visit the woods there on a regular basis, sometimes for my own pleasure and sometimes to lead groups of visiting school children through the kind of hands-on learning experience that one can only gain outside in nature's back yard. Without in-depth financial information, it isn't clear to me whether the current situation is due to poor financial decisions by the Center operating the site, increases in operating costs, under-funding by the foundation, or other cause.

No matter the reason, both causes (art and nature) are worth our contemplation in how best to preserve them for others to enjoy when we are gone, and compel our actions to do so. —W.L.

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