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Art museum idea deserves second chance

There is a wonderful new museum in Newport, filled with historic original paintings.

Because of a vote by two members of the city's Zoning Board, you can't visit the museum or see the paintings.

The museum is located in the first floor of the beautifully restored Vernon Court, a historic mansion on Bellevue Avenue between Victoria and Shepard avenues. Vernon Court was purchased about a year ago by Laurence and Judy Cutler, who have had it repaired and restored to its original splendor. Laurence Cutler is an internationally respected architect, scholar, author and art collector. Judy Cutler is an art dealer and collector with studios in New York. She also is an author and teacher. The Cutlers plan to make Vernon Court their home, living on the upper floors while using the first floor to present many of their famous paintings to the public.

It is no exaggeration to state that the Cutlers own and are prepared to display the world's largest and most significant private collection of original work from what has been called the Golden Age of American Illustration. It includes paintings by Maxfield Parrish, Norman Rockwell, N.C. Wyeth, Charles Dana Gibson, J.C. Leyendecker and others. Many of the paintings were created for magazines such as Saturday Evening Post in an era when illustration, rather than photography, was more often used for magazine covers. The collection of more than 2,000 paintings is far too large to display all at once. About 85 paintings can be displayed. They will be rotated to present various aspects of these exciting artists over time. The fact that a museum such as

this was preparing to open would be headline news in cities around the world and, at first, it seemed that this community was eager to embrace the Cutlers and their proposal. There was no reason not to like what was planned. The Cutlers knew what the city wanted and were prepared to offer it. For example, unlike other muse-

ums and mansions, the Cutlers did not seek turn Vernon Court over to a foundation to avoid payment of property taxes. It remained on the tax rolls. Records at City Hall show the Cutlers will pay \$41,899 in property taxes this year. The museum, not the building, will be run by a foundation established by the Cutlers. The Cutlers carefully developed a

plan to restore Vernon Court and presented it and their museum plans to the Historic District Commission Newport County. There were no objections. Conscious of the possible concerns

and the city Planning Board. Both gave unanimous approval. They met with officials of nearby Salve Regina University, the Newport Art Museum and the Preservation Society of

of nearby neighbors, they met with

the Bellevue-Ochre Point Neighbor-

hood Association and agreed to a set

Our view

of conditions limiting activities at the museum. There would be no bus parking, no rental of Vernon Court for weddings, no catering business, no commercial parties, no late-night events.

Laurence Cutler said they had no problem with the neighbors' requests because they never planned activities such as these. The museum would be a low-key affair that would draw those with serious interest in the art on display.

Opposition first surfaced on June 28 when the Cutlers' proposal was heard by the Zoning Board. A few neighbors hired a lawyer to object to the plan on the grounds that it represented a kind of creeping commercialism of Bellevue Avenue. The Zoning Board voted 3 to 2 in favor of the plan, but because the law requires that special use variances be approved by a 4-to-1 vote, the request was rejected. The Zoning Board later refused to reconsider the action.

The Cutlers have appealed to Superior Court and are confident the zoning decision will be overturned. If it is not, they will revise their plan and present it to the Zoning Board again.

One way or another, we hope they succeed. This museum would be a wonderful cultural addition to Newport. We share the view that there

should be no further commercialism on Bellevue Avenue. For that reason, we had strongly opposed plans by Peter de Savary, the former owner of Vernon Court, who had hoped to establish a club/hotel for wealthy members of his Carnegie Club there. That proposal was truly commercial and not in keeping with the needs of the city. The Cutlers did the city a great favor by purchasing Vernon Court, providing the final assurance that the club would not be located The Cutlers' plan is exactly the op-

of the commercial planned by de Savary. It is far less intrusive and far less commercial than the Preservation Society mansions or other properties that cater to groups in buses. Laurence and Judy Cutler have

moved into Vernon Court, making it their home; they held a family wedding there last week. They are here to stay and plan to be active, contributing members of the community. They have purchased a 3-acre lot south of Vernon Court and plan to turn it into a park. The Cutlers and the museum are welcome additions to the city. Cities all over the world would

gladly compete to house the museum

With a quick court decision or a revised proposal for the Zoning Board, Newporters may soon have access to a world-class museum in a

proposed by the Cutlers. We are fortunate that they have settled here.

beautifully restored setting.