

Museum plan attracts notable supporters

■ The Bellevue Avenue couple who want to open an illustration museum in their home say its advisory board will include high-profile people such as Whoopi Goldberg, Matt Lauer and several directors from the art world.

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NEWPORT — While the city and some neighbors remain opposed to a proposed Bellevue Avenue museum, art lovers and art-conscious celebrities are lining up behind it.

Laurence and Judy Cutler, who own Vernon Court and the uncommon collection inside of it, will announce today the people who have agreed to guide and support The National Museum of American Illustration.

The advisory board includes some of the nation's foremost art patrons and directors, a few Newport notables — such as Hugh Auchincloss III and Arch-

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bold van Beuren — and some eye-catching personalities, such as Whoopi Goldberg.

With a museum, a collection, and now the professional endorsements, all the project lacks is a zoning permit. Laurence Cutler, who has taken the city to court over its objections to his museum, said he's confident the couple's dream will soon become reality.

"This is very important to the state and to the nation, and that's why we've attracted some of the people we have to our advisory board," he said.

Observers describe the board as a collection of art professionals, some important local supporters, and high-profile clients of Judy Cutler, who runs an art gallery in Manhattan.

Goldberg, the Academy Award winning actress, collects illustrations and has bought paintings from his wife, Laurence Cutler said. Advisory board member Matt Lauer, host of the *Today* show, is also an art collector.

Other advisers stand on their professional credentials. Roger Mandle is president of the Rhode Island School of Design, and Wendell Minor, a Connecticut book illustrator, is past president of the Society of Illustrators.

J. Carter Brown, director emeritus of the National Gallery of Art, is listed as an honorary trustee.

The list impresses Milo Beach, director of the Smithsonian Institution's Freer Gallery of Art, the national Asian collection.

"Out of those names, you can hardly get better ones," he said. "Those are people with impeccable credentials."

Beach also joined the advisory board, saying American illustrators such as Norman Rockwell, Maxfield Parrish and N.C. Wyeth deserve their own museum.

"It's a kind of art I think is enormously popular. So there's a real public following for this kind of art," he said.

Illustrators from the late 19th and the 20th centuries were typically commercial artists who drew illustrations for books, calendars for companies, and covers for magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post*. The Cutlers own one of the world's largest collection of American illustrations, including the largest private collection of Rockwell originals. They wish to exhibit the works on the first floor of their Bellevue Avenue mansion, but so far they have not convinced a key city board to agree.

Last June, the Zoning Board of Review voted 3 to 2 in favor of granting the Cutlers a museum permit, one vote short of the four votes needed to issue a special-use permit.

The Cutlers appealed the zoning board's decision to Superior Court, where a hearing was held Friday. After hearing from an attorney for the Cutlers and from attorneys for two neighbors who oppose the museum, Judge Melanie Thunberg said she would issue a decision on May 5.

The Cutlers are advancing on a second front. They submitted a revised museum plan to the Zoning Board of Review and are scheduled to make a presentation before the newly appointed board at its meeting Monday.

"I have to avail myself of every opportunity to get this done," Laurence Cutler said.

Meanwhile, O. Aldon James Jr., president of the National Arts Club, is expected to tour Vernon Court today, a special showing that will climax with the announcement of the advisory board.