

A PICTURE-PERFECT NEIGHBOR



APPHOTO

NEWPORT ENTREPRENEURS: Laurence and Judy Cutler opened their National Museum of American Illustration at Vernon Court last July 4 after a battle with neighbors and the city.

Quiet growth of museum satisfies former opponents

BY LISA LIPMAN
ASSOCIATED PRESS

PROVIDENCE — A year after Newport's National Museum of American Illustration opened, neighbors who opposed the facility are quietly coexisting with the institution that took Newport to court.

The museum opened last July 4, to the chagrin of neighbors and city officials who had wanted to keep it out of the area.

In 1999, Newport's Zoning Board voted against the museum, claiming it would ruin historic Bellevue Avenue. The board's decision was supported by property owners, who argued that buses and tour groups would clog area streets.

"I guess they were trying to protect their community, and maybe something else I don't understand," said Laurence Cutler, who, with his wife, Judy, transformed a private residence called Vernon Court into a museum containing their collection of American illustrations.

"Finally, after asking one of them several times, 'What do you truly object to?' he retorted, 'Mr. Cutler, we don't really know you.' And that's not an answer," Cutler said.

The Cutlers took the city to court, claiming the board's decision was unfair. In May 2000, the Newport Superior Court ruled in favor of the Cutlers, who quietly opened the museum two months later. The Cutlers live in the building's upper floors.

The National Museum of American Illustration

bills itself as the first museum devoted to popular illustration, an art form that includes paintings created as book or magazine covers. The museum includes more than 2,000 works by artists such as Norman Rockwell and N.C. Wyeth.

Works by Charles Dana Gibson, creator of the 1940s icon the Gibson Girl, and James Montgomery Flagg, who created the World War I-era poster of a finger-pointing Uncle Sam atop the words "I Want You," are also on display.

Laurence Cutler, an architect and former Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor, and Judy Cutler, a Manhattan art dealer, decided to create a museum for their collection after witnessing many art collections dissipate upon their owners' deaths.

Both the Cutlers and the residents who opposed the museum had similar goals.

Laurence Cutler said the couple didn't want the museum to attract the masses. There has been virtual-

ly no advertising for the museum, and reservations for tours — which cost a hefty \$25 — must be made in advance and are done in small groups. Spontaneous visitors are turned away at the gate.

And even though they once voted it down, town officials say the museum is doing good things for the city.

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downtown, staying at hotels," said Keith Stokes, executive director of the Newport Chamber of Commerce. "They have deeper pockets, they're spending more time here, and more money" than tourists visiting other attractions.

The National Museum of American Illustration has at-

tracted 4,000 visitors and some powerful supporters. *Today* TV show host Matt Lauer sits on the museum's advisory board. Actress Whoopi Goldberg is also a supporter — she sent the Cutlers a Wedgewood chandelier in honor of the museum's opening. Other supporters include movie producer George Lucas and author Tom Wolfe.

Opponents of the museum have given cautious approval to it. "It doesn't seem to impinge

on anybody, so I think most people are satisfied, given that it was allowed," said Suzy Schochet, whose husband, Jay, is co-chairman of the neighborhood association that opposed the museum.

"It's fine because they open it very restrictively," Schochet said. "We still would prefer that it hadn't opened, but given that it's there, I haven't noticed anything that would really affect the neighborhood."