



(On April 7, an open letter was placed on the Save the Art-Save the Museum Facebook social media pages. Readers were invited to sign if they agreed with it. Within three days, almost 400 people had signed, and names are still being added. A complete updated list of signatures can be viewed at artberkshires.org)

The goal of strengthening the Berkshire Museum could have united the community as a source of local pride, if the Board of Trustees had transparently and actively sought support and alternative ideas from the public. By promoting its great art collection, the museum could have become a valuable engine for Pittsfield's revitalization and the city's identity as a vibrant regional arts center.

The museum's present board and staff are not the owners of the amazing art collection that was built over generations for the public. They are merely temporary stewards. True stewardship would have allowed community dialogue and engagement to develop a real strategy to enable the museum to survive and thrive and protect the art at the core of its mission, as well as supporting its other roles.

Unfortunately, the museum leadership chose the opposite course, by secretly pursuing a massive selloff of much of its irreplaceable public art collection. It then rigidly presented it as a stark either/or choice of "sell or close." The suddenness of that announcement last summer, and lack of true engagement with the public since then, aroused dismay and opposition that has been shared by many people - far more widely than those who most actively and visibly opposed it.

The lack of opportunities for true dialogue about the museum's plans also undermined the consensus and momentum of efforts to connect Pittsfield to the Berkshires' cultural life and economy. It has caused needless divisiveness in the community. It also created false dichotomies between old and young, art vs. education, science vs. culture, heritage vs. progress, and "art loving elitism" vs. "progressive" populism.

The city's overall revitalization efforts are also collateral damage. The museum's public-relations campaign led to portrayals of Pittsfield nationally as a declining community that cannot support its public resources. And the Berkshire Museum's name has become a national symbol of the destructive prospect of institutions selling public art to the highest private bidders in the global art market.

Although the Berkshire Museum has won the legal challenges, its "victory" may become a pyrrhic one. Unfortunately, as the hammer drops at Sotheby's for the sell-off of Pittsfield's artistic heritage, the public trust is also being lost.

The museum now says it's time to come together and "constructively" support its future. Where have they been for the past several years? Why did they brush aside the ideas of a thoughtful and concerned public, and the offers of assistance from experts and organizations?

Is it too late to mitigate the damage? Unless the board truly reconsiders the nature of its plans and engages the public to find a better solution for our community, the damage to the Berkshire Museum and the unfortunate impact on Pittsfield, will not be easily healed.

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