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Paul Sancya / Associated Press

Tom Monaghan, who founded Ave Maria School of Law, wants to move it from Ann Arbor to Florida. Faculty members have filed a formal complaint with the American Bar Association.

Laura Berman

Professors blast Ave Maria law school move



Like the Harrison Ford character on a mission in "Mosquito Coast," Tom Monaghan is building a new world in the subtropics. But

Monaghan needs to first pack up and move the Ann Arbor law school he's poured \$50 million into.

Now he's learning that it's much easier to deliver pizzas in 30 minutes than to transfer law professors to an inland Florida campus 1,100 miles away, especially when most of them don't want to budge.

At least 11 of the faculty members are so outraged by the pending move and the administration's disdain for their point of view

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that they filed a formal complaint with the American Bar Association.

An ABA fact-finder, responding to complaints from the dissident faculty at Ave Maria School of Law in Ann Arbor, is now investigating the charges and is expected to issue a report, according to the law school's Dean Bernard Dobranski.

The ABA has to formally "acquiesce" to the move -- and so it represents a possible impediment to the school's plans.

This week, an ad hoc faculty association published -- on Mirror of Justice.com, a blog of Catholic legal theory -- a litany of dissatisfaction with "the outrageous behavior of the law school's administration," and what they describe as abuse of power. Its title: "Crisis At Ave Maria Law."

The faculty members contend that Dobranski has retaliated against them financially, "through manipulation of the promotion and tenure system." He says he doesn't care if staff members want to go Florida or if they like him but that he won't tolerate faculty members "undermining" the law school.

Web outrage heats up

Now students and professors are burning up the blogosphere, debating the issues, even though it's finals week. "I think it's disgraceful for faculty members to be distracting students at this time," says Dobranski, who dismisses charges there's no rational basis for the law school to move.

In fact, he says, the area is poised for rapid growth, the Naples/Fort Myers metropolitan area lacks a law school, and its judges and lawyers are "very welcoming." Although he says he was initially cool to Monaghan's plan, Dobranski has become a passionate defender of the move.

Sorting it all out isn't easy, especially when the lawyers are stacked 20 deep. But the wellspring of dissatisfaction, everyone agrees, is the move to Tom Monaghan's Ave Maria University campus, on 900 acres of inland Florida land, where he's simultaneously building the community of Ave Maria Town.

One man running the show

"They're moving it to nothing," says Charles E. Rice, who sat on the school's board of governors until last year and is professor emeritus at the University of Notre Dame Law School. "The law school was cruising along very well and then all of a sudden -- we're moving to Florida.

"I've never seen anything like it. The (school's actions) are unprecedented."

Rice left the board, after a two-term limit was imposed, "probably as a way to get me off."

The protesting faculty members who say they fear for their jobs if they speak out publicly argue that a law school isn't a fiefdom or a sole proprietorship.

"They pretend it's a real law school with real boards and processes when in fact one person -- Tom Monaghan -- is in charge," one professor said.

Dobranski, who previously headed the University of Detroit's law school, demurs. "I am not Tom Monaghan's puppet," he says.

The dissidents might have less standing, at least with me, if their complaints weren't so similar to those of other disenchanting Monaghan employees over the years.

Last month, Kate Ernsting, a former Ave Maria College employee, won a Michigan Appeals Court decision and the right to have her whistleblower lawsuit against the college reinstated.

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And while applications for next year's class at the law school rose 50 percent, Dobranski expects the next class to be smaller.

Monaghan's utopian vision for a town and educational community with a shared moral perspective is obviously ambitious. Whether it ultimately proves crackpot ("just goofy," as Rice said) or credible, strife and uncertainty are exacting a toll.

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