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# THE COLMAN OCCUPATION HERITAGE MUSEUM EFFORT HASN'T DIED OUT

By Lynne K. Varner P-I Reporter

Wednesday, February 17, 1993

Section: News, Page: B1

Occupations of foreign countries have begun and ended in the seven years since Earl Debnam and his group took over Seattle's abandoned Colman School.

Debnam and a band of supporters began occupying the Central District landmark in November 1985 in a dramatic effort to urge the Seattle School District to transform the crumbling school into an African-American heritage museum.

Like most occupations, this one was intended to force the issue. During a news conference yesterday outside of Colman, Debnam acknowledged the plan has not achieved its goal.

"Over the years, we have invested a lot of energy and time to get this thing on board, (but) the mayor has not put us on his priority list like he promised when we helped him get elected," Debnam said.

People like Debnam, who stay at the former school on a rotating basis - less often since the school district shut off the water and electricity - are members of the Citizens Support Committee of the African American Heritage Museum. They say they've worked with Mayor Norm Rice and others to get funding and general support for a museum, to no avail.

But Rice spokesman Mark Murray said a committee was recently set up to examine whether there is broad-based support for a museum, and if not, what it would take to get it.

The committee is comprised of business and community leaders, including Debnam and some of his organization's members, Murray said.

Officials in the past have sought a way to turn into reality dreams of a multimillion-dollar tribute to black culture, pride and politics. The city has spent more than \$212,000 on feasibility studies for the museum.

But in a year fraught with budget woes, district officials are in no mood for compromises and have done little to resolve the illegal occupation of Colman.

"The district is stretched thin already trying to meet basic education needs," said John Richmond, schools property manager.

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Moreover, the two-acre site near 23rd Avenue South and South Massachusetts Street is the proposed home for the African American Academy, temporarily housed at Sharples Alternative Secondary School.

The old Colman building was closed and scheduled for demolition after the state Department of Transportation acquired a portion of the land for its Interstate 90 expansion in the mid-1980s.

The department helped pay for a new Colman School two blocks north, but the old structure has remained standing as district officials wait for construction funds to rebuild it.

The tentative plan to move the academy into a rebuilt Colman School is contingent on passage of a multimillion-dollar school construction bond.

Where there has been a clear educational benefit, Seattle School District officials have shown flexibility and allowed varying uses of buildings. For example, the Nordic Heritage Museum in Ballard is housed in an old school under an agreement calling for minimal rent in exchange for building repairs the school system would not have been able to afford.

"Our priorities have to be how things relate to the educational needs of the children of the community," Richmond said.

But Debnam and his group say they are tired of waiting for city and school officials to make the museum happen. Members yesterday expressed confidence they could raise much of the money through the African-American community.

The Seattle Restaurant Association has donated equipment the organization will use in opening a restaurant at 21st Avenue and Union Street, Debnam said. Profits from the restaurant will go toward developing the museum.

"We're confident this type of self-help attitude will attract a lot of support," Debnam said.

jk/pm

This article contained at least one photo or illustration as described below:

**Type:** Photo

**Description:** ELLEN M. BANNER/P-I -- Earl Debnam stands before the old Colman School in the Central District, which he and others seized after it was abandoned in 1985.

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