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NEIGHBORS SAY SQUATTERS FOUL OLD SCHOOL SITE

By Angelo Bruscas P-I Reporter

Monday, June 28, 1993

Section: News, Page: B1

Neighbors of the old Colman School, earmarked for an African-American heritage museum, say squatters living in the building the past eight years have created a health hazard because they have no running water or sanitation service.

A Seattle-King County Department of Public Health inspector said he had received reports on the conditions from neighbors but was leaving it up to the city to resolve the problems with supporters of the museum, who have occupied the building since 1985.

The Mayor's Office says that complaints of health hazards had not been raised before and that a report will be issued in September setting up a timetable to build a long-planned African-American heritage museum at the site.

The squatters say they are acting as caretakers of the building and will occupy it until the museum is built.

While neighbors of the former school say they want the building preserved and restored for a community center, including the heritage museum, they complain that the building is deteriorating.

In letters to city inspectors and health officials, neighbor Daniel Bretzke described conditions inside the building at 1515 24th Ave. S.

"The stench was terrible from human and animal feces. There were dead animal carcasses mixed in with the garbage. The basement rooms are certainly a habitation for rodents and other vermin."

Another neighbor, Denby Barnett, said the community has supported restoration of the building for the museum and for a community center. But the health problems make the site a hazard to the community, he said.

"What we want is to see someone get off the dime and turn that into a usable asset to the community," Barnett said.

Earl Debnam, organizer of the group supporting the heritage museum, said the squatters want the museum and are occupying the building as caretakers to prevent vandalism and clean up garbage left at the site when it closed as a school in the early 1980s.



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He denied there were feces left in the building, and after he agreed to a private tour of the building for the Post-Intelligencer, no feces could be found, although the basement was strewn with garbage and smelled of mildew.

Debnam and a group of supporters began occupying the Interstate-90 corridor landmark in November 1985 in a dramatic effort to urge the Seattle School District to turn the crumbling school into the museum.

The district still owns the school property, but the neighbors say the city and the school district have refused to take action against the squatters other than to cut off utilities in the building.

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

Debnam acknowledged the building still needs to be cleaned up once plans are approved for its use. He said complaints that children have been run off the property are true, but noted it was for their own safety.

``We made it a point to keep it a place where people don't want to hang out," Debnam said.

He noted his group has applied for a \$100,000 grant from the city to begin cleaning up and repairing windows and doors broken by vandals. But Debnam said the group intends to stay in the building until the museum is finally built.

``We're doing the best we can with what we have to work with," he said.

Denise Hunt, staff worker for the city's Office of Neighborhoods, showed up at the school last week and mediated a confrontation between 10 neighbors and Debnam, who refused to let the group tour the building.

Hunt said the city is trying to develop final plans to build the museum and determine how best to use the old school. Hunt said conditions inside seem ``to have gotten better" over the past several months, but acknowledged that the neighbors have raised legitimate concerns about health and safety.

``It's like walking on egg shells," she said of the dispute.

A committee will meet again July 20 to try to complete plans for the site, she said.

Bretzke, Barnett and other neighbors say they intend to circulate petitions in the community to try to get the safety issues resolved.

``We want this secure for our families and the children in the area," Bretzke said.

But Debnam said the facility is secure, and noted that the gym is already being renovated for use as a boxing gym for local youths.

``We've been there for eight years, and there has never been any criminality . . . only a lot of mud-slinging," he said.

gh/mc/pm

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