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End May Be Near In School Standoff -- Solution Mullied In 8-Year Dispute

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As the afternoon sun filters through the tall, cracked windows, it reveals a spectrum of decay inside: bags of garbage, broken refrigerators, flies buzzing through dimly lit rooms, peeling paint, broken chairs and asbestos draping from boiler-room pipes. A cat cries in a dark corner, hidden by mounds of litter.



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This is not a dump. This is the old **Colman School** - site of an 8-year campaign by black activists who are about to see their struggle end, although the rot and debris symbolize how flawed the whole siege has been.

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In 1985, when Ronald Reagan was president and Charles Royer was mayor of Seattle, Earl Debnam led a group of black activists into the vacant building to protest state plans to tear it down. The expansion of Interstate 90 had already razed much of the South Seattle neighborhood, and the historic building at 1515 24th Ave. S. was to be next to go.

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Incensed, Debnam's group occupied the building and insisted it be renovated as an African American Heritage **Museum**. At the time, they planned to stay about 90 days. Now, eight years later, they still post a watchman inside.

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And what has happened in that time? Friendships have splintered. Bureaucracies have bungled. Racism has been charged. And nearly a quarter-million dollars has been spent on studies of the building and its problem.

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African-American heritage is still an issue; but so is safety, and the old structure's impact on the neighborhood.

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There are signs that closure may be near. Yesterday Debnam agreed with the city to consider permanently abandoning the building in

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return for City Hall assurances that his dream for a **museum** is being seriously considered.

"The signals I'm getting from the **school** district and current administration is that it's time to move forward with this," he said. "I'm hopeful we're at that point."

Still, the whole **Colman** building issue has continued to fester, surfacing recently in the mayoral race when neighbors confronted Mayor Norm Rice, saying any child could walk inside the unlocked doors and enter the hazardous hallways and dungeon-like basement.

Rice countered that his administration inherited the situation and is actively trying to resolve it.

In April, the mayor formed a committee to study whether the building could be renovated into the **museum** Debnam wants.

In a report issued last month, the committee said the dream was feasible though "daunting." Estimates to renovate the building range from \$5.7 million to \$8 million. Annual operation for the **museum** would cost \$100,000 to \$175,000.

The committee recommended creating a Public Development Authority (PDA), much like the one used to run Pike Place Market.

Such arrangements rely on legal and financial independence from the city but also require a substantial city commitment. A PDA is run by a board appointed by the mayor and city council.

A final recommendation won't come until December or January, at which point the city will have to start generating broad public support for the expensive project.

That might not be easy.

In the school's immediate neighborhood, called the South Atlantic Street Community, feelings about the building and its proposed use are mixed. Among 60 black, white and Asian residents who responded to a recent neighborhood poll, 28 percent felt the building should be torn down, 22 percent thought it should be renovated into a community and recreation center and 14 percent favored the **museum**.



The poll, while unscientific, reflects a deep frustration with the endless struggle over the proposed project, and with Debnam's controversial occupation of the building.

"I think it's true that if Earl and some other key players had not occupied the building, it would be gone. It was slated for destruction," says resident Denby Barnett. "On the other hand, the same kind of single-minded determination that made them go in there and take action has also kept them from building the alliances needed to get what they want. It's a paradox."

Debnam has accused those who oppose his actions of having racist motives, even comparing Barnett to a modern-day Hitler on a power trip to stop African Americans from getting what they want for their communities.

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Such outspokenness is a Debnam trademark. And because he has backed it up with action, it has won him some admirers.

While he doesn't condone all of Debnam's tactics, "you have to really admire the people who've stayed the course on this," says Robert Flowers, a vice president with Washington Mutual Bank and a member of the mayor's advisory committee on **Colman School**. "Earl's role has been very positive. He's worked hard to secure that site for a **museum**."

Yet his militancy also intimidates people unaccustomed to such provocations.

"The nature of the takeover and its racial overtones are things we're uncomfortable with in Seattle," says Denice Hunt, an official with the Department of Neighborhoods who is coordinating the mayoral committee reviewing the issue.

"I've seen these things in other cities where they would have resolved this a long time ago," she said. "They (the occupants) were militant. I think, probably for racial reasons, nobody wanted to be the first person to move to make it end badly, because that would have made martyrs of the group."

So the standoff continued for years. Neighbors concerned about deteriorating conditions in and around the site contacted the Seattle-King County Department of Health but were told the agency had no authority within the building - and please take the matter to the Fire Department.

The Fire Department inspected the building in July and again on Oct. 6 but said the department lacked the authority to seal off the structure. That was up to the owner, the Seattle **School** District.

The district, in turn, ignored repeated requests to secure the building, saying the city had asked it to back off until an agreement could be reached with Debnam and other trespassers in the building.

With that goal now in sight, the building will be boarded and sealed off next week, according to **school** district spokeswoman Susan Byers.

"We've been working with the city to try and accomplish this so it wouldn't worsen the situation," she said. "No one wanted those people with such a vested interest in the **museum** to think they were relinquishing that stand and create a confrontation."

It appears, after eight years, that such a confrontation has been avoided.

"This is something we need," Debnam says. "You don't see brothers and sisters in dashikis (African garb) out there shooting each other. They have a sense of self-esteem. But when that is missing, it's a total breakdown. We need a higher principle than who can go out there and shoot first."

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