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Local News: Tuesday, September 06, 1994

Black-Heritage Museum Backers Uniting At Last -- Community Aid Sought For 'Enormous' Task

Daryl Strickland

On the side of the old **Colman Elementary School** in Seattle, Earl Debnam is painting a mural.

It is a tribute to deceased leaders like Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Harriet Tubman, John Brown - people who have shaped American history. But the mural drawn on the future home of the African American Heritage **Museum** and Cultural Center does more than pay homage to historical heroes.

"This," Debnam said recently as he glanced at a sketch of the mural, "is a signal of the end of the struggle, and the beginning of creating a **museum**."

Nine years ago, as expansion of Interstate 90 caused demolition of large parts of the South Seattle neighborhood, Debnam led a drive to save the old **school**. He believed the building should be turned into a black-heritage **museum**. To emphasize the point, he moved in as a squatter.

He and others planned to stay for 90 days. Instead, the eight-year move-in turned into one of the longest occupations of a public building in the nation's history.

Last October, Debnam agreed with the city to permanently abandon the building in return for City Hall's assurance that his dream for a **museum** received serious consideration. It did.

A committee commissioned by Mayor Norm Rice said in February: "The task is enormous, but certainly not impossible, given the distance that we have already traveled."

The committee estimated renovation costs at between \$6.3 million and \$7.2 million. The museum's annual budget for the first three years would run \$100,000.

They recommended the project be governed in two ways: By forming a public-development authority to handle lease negotiations, hire architects and handle other business matters related to renovating a building; and by creating a nonprofit corporation to raise money and devise programs for the **museum**.

And they agreed that the original community leaders, who successfully campaigned for the building, should also serve on the board. The board's challenge: To raise \$200,000 and register 2,500 individual or family

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memberships as a sign of community support for the **museum** before the project moved forward.

But the committee, expected to disband after releasing the report, fell into dispute, delaying the project even further. The tension from bickering among themselves caused its chairman, John Cannon, to resign in June for health reasons.

At one meeting, Cannon recalls, 20 visitors were invited to show up as supporters of various ideas, forcing some committee regulars to sit in the hallway.

The arguments essentially boiled down to control of the project. The original members, who felt public scorn over their methods to acquire the **school** building, didn't want to get shoved out of the way by those who were new to the project.

Perhaps the biggest issue of all was using the bylaws and articles of incorporation the original members drew up eight years ago, rather than creating new ones. The original members persuaded others on the mayor's committee to adopt these rules, giving the founders and the methods they used to acquire the site more legitimacy and clout.

This also gave the four original members power to decide who served on the museum's board of directors. They have decided to have 33 board members, half of them already appointed.

Initially, some were concerned those on the board would not inspire confidence among a broad range of potential donors. Rather, says James Fearn, a land-use attorney serving as special counsel for the Seattle Commons, the museum's board is becoming a mix of young and old, of professionals and community-spirited, of "those who can contribute money, wealth or wisdom."

The results are encouraging, following a key meeting last week. When Fearn was nominated for interim co-chair, which he was later elected, one of the younger members said: "I know Brother Debnam (also named interim co-chair), but I don't know you at all."

Fearn gave a brief autobiography. Then the man asked, "What are your politics?"

Another member spoke up: "We don't need to get into politics. That has nothing to do with museums."

Such discussion encouraged Fearn. "Even though there was disagreement," he recalls, "there was a reasonable discussion of it. There was no hostility toward any individual or ideas, and that's the kind of meeting we need."

In coming weeks, more board members are expected to be announced, and the business of raising money soon will begin.

"We have proven we can prevail and fight," said Charlie James, one of the original members and a candidate for 37th District state representative. "Now we'll prove we can work together for the common good."

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