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NEW VISION SEEN FOR AN OLD BUILDING COLMAN SCHOOL MAY BECOME AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUM

By TINA KELLEY P-I Reporter

Monday, May 29, 1995

Section: News, Page: B1

The stately facade with the broken-out windows looks desolate, like a doll with missing eyes. White stains flow down the bricks from where the gutters backed up and the water ran down.

But Charlie James and Earl Debnam, together with other community leaders, have a vision of the old Colman School when it

is scrubbed, renovated and full of people again.

They can see the building, on 23rd Avenue near Interstate 90, as the African American Heritage Museum and Cultural Center. They see it as the largest such museum in the country, and, after a 10-year struggle, they feel closer than ever to seeing their dream realized.

They are planning rooms for exhibits; art, music and theater classes; and a hall of fame for African American athletes. They want to have the windows repaired within a couple months, and fix the roof and trim the bushes.

Members of the 20-member museum board are working to raise matching money for a \$65,000 grant from the city of Seattle. They plan a kickoff festival for June 10 with the goal of enlisting 2,500 members and raising \$300,000 within a year for the museum.

The museum is expected to cost \$7 million to \$8 million.

The school, owned by the Seattle School District, was built in 1909 and was closed in 1985 to make way for the freeway and because of concerns the building might be damaged in an earthquake.

Debnam and other activists who wanted to turn the building into a museum occupied it from November 1985 to 1993, when negotiations began in earnest with the city.

James, the museum's chair of fund raising, said he first thought the museum would become a reality on the first night the group spent in the

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building. They were afraid of actions the police might take against them, he said, and they were apprehensive about the cold temperatures.

There was no heat or running water in the building. The building had a pay telephone which public officials used to call them.

“That night, when you put your life on the line for something, you've got to have a firm commitment right here,” James said.

“My nose is running just thinking about it,” said Debnam, the museum's board president.

Last year the museum won a \$65,000 Neighborhood Matching Fund Award to limit the deterioration to the building, and a \$3,000 Small and Simple Matching Fund Award from the city for signs and cleanup. The city has spent about \$240,000 studying the museum's feasibility and potential programs.

“From the mayor's perspective, it's no longer a question of whether or not there should be an African American museum,” said Mark Murray, spokesman for Mayor Norm Rice. “The real question now is when and how.”

City officials stress the need for the museum's backers to find major private partners to help fund it. The board will solicit support from major foundations, local corporations and Seattle's black athletes, as well as from community organizations.

But both the advocates and the school's neighbors have been surprised by how long it has taken to get this far.

Some residents say the school should be torn down and the site developed for open space, as the Department of Transportation planned.

“It's the focal point of our community and it's still a tremendous eyesore. Most people around here are not exactly thrilled,” said Terry Esposito of the South Atlantic Street Community Association.

“I know fund raising takes a long time. (But) it's better to have their vision, instead of no vision and have nothing happening to that building. We're trying to be patient.”

James said the delays had a lot to do with the politics of race.

“There's always a sense when African Americans push for something like this that they're getting something they don't deserve, that people are giving in to them,” he

said.

“It's got something to do with us, too,” Debnam admitted. “We wanted an empowered institution. There was a whole lot of opportunity to make a deal with this politician or with that politician and come off smelling like a rose, but we wanted more people involved in this process.”

Even though city officials estimate it could be cheaper to build a new museum from scratch, James pointed to the old Colman School's importance to the neighborhood.

“It housed thousands and thousands of African American children,” he said. “It's a symbol of community pride already.”

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