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Colman School To Get New Life As African-American Museum -- Sale To Community Group Caps A 12-Year Campaign

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After a dozen years of alternating frustration and hope, Seattle's African-American community will assume ownership of the former **Colman School** for development as an African American Heritage **Museum** and Cultural Center.

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The Seattle **School** Board yesterday agreed to sell the vandalized and derelict building to the heritage **museum** board for \$329,000.

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Terms of the sale have been under negotiation since the **museum** board reorganized about a year ago under the leadership of Bob Flowers, a Washington Mutual Bank senior vice president. But attempts to gain control of the building for a **museum** go back much further.

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A small group of African-American activists occupied the **school** in 1985, shortly after it closed to make way for construction of Interstate 90 between Rainier Avenue South and Mount Baker ridge.

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The 50,000-square-foot **school**, built in 1909, is at 1515 24th Ave. S., directly south of the freeway lid.

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"It's a very proud day for a number of us," said Michael Preston, a black **School** Board member. He recalled that as a board member he visited activists Earl Debnam, Omari Tahir and Charlie James, one evening shortly after the protest started. At the time they planned to stay in the building just 90 days to make their point but ended up occupying it off and on for eight years until the city agreed to back the project.

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Now the big job will be raising money. Flowers said the 27-member **museum** board needs to raise \$8 million to \$12 million for building

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renovations and \$5 million for programs and an endowment. For the purchase, the **museum** will pay \$50,000 down and the balance over three years, according to **school** district documents.

To complete the purchase, Flowers said, the board hopes to raise about \$100,000 per year from the city's African-American community.

The plan is to obtain other funding in the form of grants from private foundations, corporate sponsors and public agencies and open the **museum** sometime in 2000.

The first steps will be a new roof and replacement of windows, nearly all of which are broken, said Mel Streeter, the organization's lead architect.

For students in the area, a new **Colman**, its name recently changed to Thurgood Marshall Elementary, was built on the north side of the freeway lid.

Six **School** Board members voted to approve the sale. Ellen Roe abstained.

Kiewit gets Ballard contract

In other business, the board unanimously approved a \$35 million contract for construction of a new 240,000-square-foot Ballard High **School** at the existing site on Northwest 65th Street near 15th Avenue Northwest.

The contractor, Kiewit Construction, is expected to start work Aug. 6, beginning with four to six weeks of hazardous materials removal before full-scale demolition occurs.

Addressing the board, Ballard graduate Chris Jackins, who has led the fight for renovation of the old building rather than new construction, said the construction bid was \$1.2 million over budget, meaning there would be cost overruns in the districts 19-**school**, \$357 million building program.

That's not true, argued John Vacchiery, the district's director of facilities planning and construction. He said the new high **school** is still within the \$48 million total project cost - including not just construction but architects' fees, sales taxes and furniture - budgeted after voters approved the construction program in 1995.

During the two years of construction, Ballard students will attend classes in the former Lincoln High **School** in Wallingford, which is getting a facelift this summer so students can use about two-thirds of the building in September.

Structural work means the rest of Lincoln won't be usable until January and students will be crowded until then, said Vacchiery.

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