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Local News: Thursday, October 28, 1999

African-American Museum Faces Deadline -- School District Says Property's Sale Void If Conflicting Groups Can't Finance Plan

Alex Fryer
Seattle Times Staff Reporter

Two plans have emerged to transform a former Central Area **school** into an African American Heritage **Museum**, just days before the Seattle **School District's** deadline to consider other options for the property.

The **school** district agreed last year to sell **Colman School** to **museum** boosters for \$329,000, far below market value. So far, the district has not received a single payment.

The district set a deadline of Sunday for the **museum** to come up with roughly \$200,000 in late payments, or the deal is void.

Several groups have scrambled to meet the deadline, but the 15-year effort to build a black cultural center in Seattle, estimated to cost \$12 million, has been fraught with difficulties almost from its inception.

The problem is that two different boards of directors say they are the true leaders of the African American Heritage **Museum**.

That division has led to two very different proposals submitted to the **school** district.

Omari Tahir-Garrett, chairman of one of the **museum** boards, arrived unannounced at the Seattle **School** District Administration Building yesterday with a plan and a plea.

In 1985 Tahir-Garrett and three other activists broke into **Colman School** and occupied the empty building for eight years, until city officials committed funds for a cultural center. The occupation was hailed as the longest act of civil disobedience in the nation's history.

Tahir-Garrett said yesterday that he had secured a loan for \$356,000 from Evergreen Pacific Services Mortgage to purchase **Colman School**. The homes of several of his board members were used as collateral, Tahir-Garrett said. He would not identify his financial supporters.

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Told he could not speak with schools Superintendent Joseph Olchefske, Tahir-Garrett and other activists presented their financial plan to Olchefske's administrative assistant. Tahir-Garrett also asked for an extension of Sunday's deadline.

The district's property manager, John Richmond, said he was unaware of Tahir-Garrett's proposal and could not comment.

Even with financial backing, Tahir-Garrett may not be an acceptable partner for the district.

The district signed an agreement with Washington Mutual Bank Vice President Bob Flowers, who became chairman of the **museum** board in 1993.

Five years later, just before he was ejected from Flowers' board, Tahir-Garrett filed paperwork with the Secretary of State's Office naming himself as president of the African American Heritage **Museum** and listing a new slate of directors.

The rift stopped public funding of the project, which amounted to more than \$700,000.

James Fearn, an official with the Seattle office of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, has recently replaced Flowers as chairman of the original **museum** board.

According to Fearn, **school**-district officials have made it clear that the deal to sell **Colman School** remains with the board Fearn leads.

Fearn said his group would submit a plan to the **school** district tomorrow that calls for a private developer to purchase **Colman School**.

The developer, Murray Franklyn, would build about 40 housing units on the property. In exchange, Fearn and his group would build a 15,000-square-foot **museum**.

But there's a problem with that proposal, too.

The original deal with the **school** district specified that a **museum** - not housing units - would be developed on the property. There's no guarantee the **School** Board would allow the sale of **Colman School** at a price below market rates if private housing units were included.

School-district officials say the deadline may be extended if either **museum** board submits a detailed plan by Sunday.

Alex Fryer's phone message number is 206-464-8124. His e-mail address is afryer@seattletimes.com

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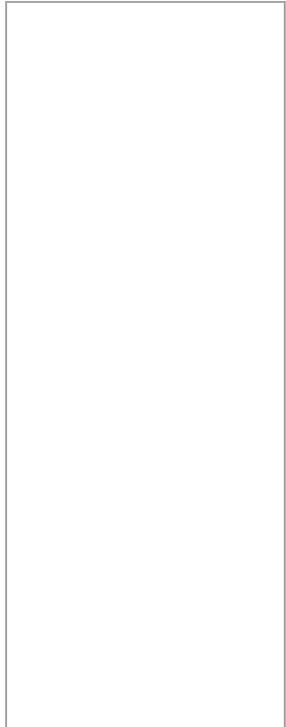


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