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Colman School Talks Continue -- Deal Not Sunk By Museum Group's Lack Of Payments

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The Seattle **School** District has given a second chance to a group seeking to turn the former **Colman School** into an African American Heritage **Museum**.

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After meeting behind closed doors last night, the **School** Board decided it would renegotiate the sale of the vacant Central Area **school**, pushing back a deadline it had set to receive late payments on the property.

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The **school** district agreed last year to sell the surplus property to **museum** boosters for \$329,000, far below market value, but has not received a payment. Oct. 31 was set as a deadline for the **museum** to come up with about \$200,000 in delinquent payments or the deal would be void.

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Although the district did not receive the money, **School** Board officials yesterday agreed to continue talking with a group that wants to build apartments as well as a **museum** on the site.

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The group, led by James Fearn, an official with the Seattle office of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, calls for a private developer to purchase the property and build about 40 rental units. In exchange, Fearn and his group would build a **museum** of at least 15,000 square feet.

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But several issues remain before a final contract can be signed, said Fearn.

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The **school** district said that real-estate prices in the area have increased 43 percent since the deal for **Colman School** was signed. That means the district may ask for about \$470,000.



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Fearn said he questions whether the value of **Colman School** has increased that much. He said the private developer, Murray Franklyn, has indicated it is willing to pay \$470,000, but **museum** boosters are researching a fair price for the property.

By selecting Fearn's group, the **school** district indicated it was not willing to negotiate with Omari Tahir-Garrett, who also submitted a proposal for the site.

In 1985, Tahir-Garrett and three others broke into **Colman School** and occupied the building for eight years, until city officials committed funds for a cultural center.

Last year, just before he was ejected from the **museum** 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.

Tahir-Garrett still claims leadership of the **museum** effort, and opposes building housing units in **Colman School**. He has threatened to take legal action against the **school** district to prevent a deal with Fearn's group.

Although the divisions that have plagued the project for almost 15 years have not healed, Fearn said he was confident his partnership with Murray Franklyn would prevail.

"If Omari thinks he has legal remedies, we'll have to deal with that. If someone wants to file a lawsuit, you can't stop them," said Fearn.

But the **museum** effort is no longer reliant on public money, and that makes the possibility of legal action by Tahir-Garrett far less worrisome, he said.

A final deal between Fearn's group and the **school** district may be signed within a month. If all the necessary permits are approved, the African American Heritage **Museum** could open by mid-2001.

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