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African-American museum takes 'two big steps' forward

Thursday, March 16, 2000

By **REBEKAH DENN** SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

Plans for an African-American Heritage Museum in Seattle, mired in a leadership struggle for years, took a leap forward yesterday when organizers announced they had resolved their differences and raised money for a down payment on the museum building.

"It's two big steps," said Seattle School Board member Michael Preston, who helped facilitate talks between the two groups claiming leadership over the museum board.

Earl Debnam, who has been involved in the museum struggle since 1985, presented the School Board with a \$50,000 cashiers check yesterday as a down payment on the old Colman School building in Rainier Valley.

Members of both factions that had previously claimed leadership of the museum board will now work together to make the museum a reality, Debnam said. An earlier plan to finance the museum by building housing units on part of the property probably will be scrapped, he said.

James Fearn, interim chairman of the museum board, said he hopes the reconciliation is a sign that the project is finally moving forward.

The board previously had recognized Fearn's group rather than the group Debnam represented.

"It's always a good thing to have everybody working together," Fearn said. "The division has lasted too long."

The down payment is the first money the district has seen for the building since agreeing to sell it to the museum group in 1997. That agreement had seemingly ended a fractious fight that began in 1985 with an eight-year occupation of the school by museum supporters.

But the production of the down payment doesn't necessarily mean the museum will go forward.

Frustrated by delays and repeated extensions, the School Board had said it would cancel its agreement to sell the property to the museum board if it didn't receive a payment by March 1.

The board needs to have more discussions before deciding what steps to take next, School Board President Barbara Schaad-Lamphere said last night. Its next talks will take place later this month or early next month, she said.

Board members have said previously that they have a responsibility to the public to get money for the building -- whether from the museum group or from another buyer -- rather than leave it in limbo any longer.

The delay has also angered neighbors who say the abandoned building is an eyesore that is blocking their attempts to improve the neighborhood.

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Debnam declined to say who contributed to the down payment, but said it was made up from various museum board and community members.

With the leadership struggle resolved, Preston said yesterday, he believed the museum would have enough support from the community and beyond to raise the rest of the money.

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