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Local News: Tuesday, July 04, 2000

African-American museum may be doomed by feud

Keith Ervin
Seattle Times staff reporter

An effort to reconcile the feuding promoters of an African American Heritage **Museum** has collapsed, and the Seattle **School** District may be on the verge of selling the abandoned **school** where the **museum** was to be located.

The latest deadline for supporters to pay \$471,000 for purchase of the old **Colman School** building passed without payment Friday, said district Superintendent Joseph Olchefske.

"That deadline has come and gone. We've extended it in the past and had made clear we are not going to extend it again," he said. The **School** Board will discuss the fate of the old **school** tomorrow.

Infighting has plagued the **museum** project, which became a cause celebre in the African-American community. Activists occupied the 1910 brick building, on a hill overlooking 23rd Avenue South above the Interstate 90 tunnel, on and off for eight years.

The occupation ended in 1993, when the city agreed to fund the **museum**. But two competing boards of directors have claimed to represent the project.

After a deadline to buy the property expired Friday, **School** Board members asked the two **museum** boards to patch up their differences. The boards had reconciled long enough to negotiate Friday's deadline for payment of \$471,000 and set a Dec. 31 deadline for raising \$2 million more to develop the **museum**.

Contrary to the superintendent's statements, Omari Tahir-Garrett, the self-professed chairman of the board, said his group gave the district paperwork Thursday showing they had financing to buy the property.

One disagreement was over whether to include condominiums in the building along with the **museum**. The **School** Board nixed the condos after an economic analysis showed a zoning change would be required.

The reconstituted board fell apart as Tahir-Garrett, one of the building's original occupiers, insisted he was board chairman. Most of the board members quit, including James Fearn, a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development official and the competing chairman.


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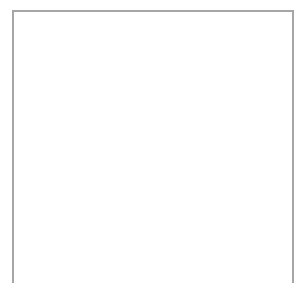


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"It's been a really difficult thing to work with. There have been lawsuits; there have been fistfights," Fearn said. "There has been so much difficulty and controversy about a **museum** at this site. Maybe it's better to regroup and look someplace else than keep fighting these battles."

Tahir-Garrett said a **museum** ultimately will be built at the **school**. He called the city government, the **school** district, Fearn and Fearn's allies "dream killers" who have worked to sabotage the project.

Tahir-Garrett said opposition was being spearheaded by downtown interests who want to gentrify the Central District "and run black people out of there."

School Board member Michael Preston said, "My impression is that Omari Tahir has once again damaged the opportunity for the African-American community to have that **museum**. That's all I'll say."

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