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Editorials & Opinion: Thursday, August 24, 2000

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## A promising new future for Colman School

THANKS to the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle, a fractious 16-year community saga may be about to end. The League wants to buy and develop the old **Colman School** in South Seattle.

A band of community activists occupied the **school** in 1985, sparking one of the longest acts of civil disobedience in this nation's history. In that time, the city has witnessed fistfights, lawsuits and police arrests - all in an effort to create an African-American heritage **museum**.

Despite \$700,000 spent by city agencies in planning and developing the idea, a **museum** is no closer to reality than it was in the beginning. It is time to move this drama into its final act.

The Urban League should be commended for taking a step in the right direction. The League would purchase the **school** from Seattle Public Schools for an as yet undetermined price, but estimated to be about \$1.5 million. The 48,000-square-foot building and adjacent land would then be converted into a multiplex of minority-owned businesses, affordable housing units and a cultural-arts center.

James Kelly, the League's executive director, has the best shot of getting this project done. He has worked to build allies among Seattle **school** officials. Kelly's own board includes former Mayor Norm Rice, under whose administration much of the planning for a **museum** was done. Moreover, Kelly and the Urban League have already put up \$100,000 to show they are serious. In an open letter to the community, Kelly promises the project can be completed by 2002 or 2003.

That promise prompts a few concerns. The Urban League should not place speed above quality. This undertaking will not be quick, nor will it be cheap. By their own estimates, it will take \$7 million in public and private funds to buy, renovate and develop the **school**. The 1910 brick building is plagued by seismic problems, asbestos and other environmental hazards.

Some will be dismayed that plans for an African-American **museum** have been scrapped. They will put forth tired arguments that the Central Area community has once again lost out on having a cultural landmark. But the Urban League's plan calls for a cultural center that could be used for educational and cultural programs.

Others may argue that in Seattle's red-hot economy, the district could make a bundle by placing the **Colman school** for sale on the open market. Indeed, the district is currently getting a new property appraisal and has also invited bids by potential buyers.

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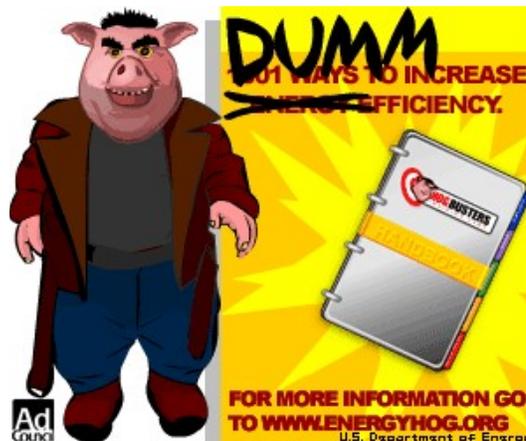
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But state law allows **school** districts to sell properties for 90 percent of their appraised value, giving the League a break. And district leaders are hoping this plan of the Urban League's works. It will foster closer relations between two often estranged entities as well as rid the district of a longtime headache.

The Urban League has a tall task ahead of it. We are keeping our fingers crossed.

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