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Smaller Colman School project proposed by the Urban League

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The Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle slashed \$11 million in costs from its proposal to convert the vacant Colman School into apartments and a long-sought African-American heritage museum.

A group of consultants earlier this year put together a \$24 million plan. The league, which must tap private donors for millions to make the project work, then hired developer Maria Barrientos to remove a free-standing parking building and trim other costs.

Barrientos came back this week with a \$13 million version that calls for renovating the 60,000-square-foot, historic brick structure into 42 affordable apartments, a 12,000-square-foot museum and cultural center, and 12,000 square feet of offices.

The league likely would occupy a portion of that office space, said league president James Kelly. The league promotes its Colman School project as an "urban village," prompting some to refer to it as the Urban League Village. The league calls it Colman Village.

As part of reducing the proposal, the league received a one-year extension of its option to buy the 2-acre, Central District site from the Seattle School District at a price of \$1.2 million. The option now lasts to July 2002.



The Urban League has reduced to \$13 million an earlier \$24 million plan to convert Colman School into a museum and housing.

"The (\$24 million) didn't make sense to us," said league Chairman Paul Chiles, head of his own Seattle commercial real estate brokerage. "That sounded prohibitive, so we were ready to scrap it. But Maria has been able to get the numbers down."

At the request of Mayor Paul Schell, the Seattle City Council last spring voted to grant the league \$400,000 to cover costs of putting the proposal together.

Even at \$13 million, the plan is a large one for the non-profit league.

Next, the league will conduct a pivotal fundraising campaign to generate \$6 million to \$7 million in private contributions. Kelly said the effort may begin next month.

Barrientos described raising that money as the proposal's largest obstacle. A financial feasibility study by Collins Group determined that level of contributions is available and identified grants that could cover much of the remaining costs.

Numerous African-Americans went to school in the 92-year-old school before the district closed it in 1985. After the closing, activists occupied the building, saying they wouldn't leave until the city supported placing a heritage center there.

The occupation lasted eight years, until then-Mayor Norm Rice pledged city support. The activists formed a museum board of directors, but their effort to buy the property for \$471,000 fell apart.

The league is a non-profit agency geared toward providing disadvantaged people with job training, welfare-to-work assistance and other services. Kelly said some African-American leaders began pushing the league to step into the Colman School project two years ago.

The original activists aren't part of the league's effort, which may improve the league's fundraising chances but also leaves the league navigating a delicate political minefield wherein the originators could become opponents.

"Because they weren't able to complete the earlier task, our job is to complete it," Kelly said. "We're in the old saying: We agree to disagree."

"If we can't do it, given the strong opinions that are out there, perhaps nobody can do it," Chiles said. "This is an Urban League project."

The league is also attempting to buy two adjacent acres from the state Department of Transportation, also for about \$1.2 million.

Planning the project slowed down this summer after the league found contaminated soil on the site. Kelly said the environmental firm Parametrix estimated cleaning up the underground petroleum would cost \$15,000; the league's negotiations with the school district about buying the site include whether the district or the league will pay for that.

Seattle architect Donald King's firm, DKA, is the project's designer.

