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Local News: Tuesday, January 21, 2003

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Black museum nears a milestone

By Melanthia Mitchell
The Associated Press

For more than two decades the **Colman School** in Seattle has stood silent, an abandoned, dilapidated brick building with its windows boarded shut and its foreground overrun with weeds.

But when James Kelly looks, he sees a place that will be transformed into the city's first African-American **museum** and cultural center.

"It's a place by which people can live, work, learn and play," said Kelly, president of the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle, which is leading the restoration project.

The nonprofit organization, one of 115 affiliates of the New York City-based National Urban League, has collected close to \$1 million to purchase the building from the Seattle **School** District.

When the offer is presented to the Seattle **School** Board tomorrow, Kelly hopes he can officially announce the purchase of the building. Planners of the \$17 million renovation say they expect more money to roll in once the Urban League owns **Colman School**. Completion is slated for next year.

The Urban League approached the **school** district in 2000 with an interest in buying the building. The renovation includes using about one-third of the 60,000-square-foot building for a **museum**. The remaining space would include businesses, more than 40 apartments — both low-income and market-rate — and the Urban League's offices.

There are no set plans for what the **museum** would include, although it is expected to be a mixture of artifacts and contemporary art, Urban League consultant Shani Taha said.

The next step is further community discussion, including a teen advisory board, on what people would like to see displayed.

"There's so much rich history here," Kelly said. "I think the story has to be told." About 48,000 blacks live in Seattle today, making up about 8.4 percent of the population, according to U.S. Census figures.

Colman School has played an important role in the city's black history. Built in 1909, it was one of six elementary schools in the city. Its student population was 75 percent black.

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The **school** district closed the aging building in 1985 and built Thurgood Marshall Elementary a few blocks away. Soon after, black activists broke into the vacant **Colman** building and demanded it be turned into an African-American **museum**. Some stayed there for eight years, until the city reportedly agreed to back the project.

Critics of the Urban League's plans, including those who occupied **Colman School**, complain they have not been included in the museum's planning.

"For us not to be a part of it at this point is uncivilized," said Michael Greenwood, one of six people who occupied the abandoned **school**.

The project, however, has drawn support from community leaders such as former Mayor Norm Rice and City Council President Peter Steinbrueck.

The council in 2001 awarded the Urban League \$400,000 for project planning, including engineering and other studies and architectural renderings.

It also has received challenge grants of \$750,000 from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and \$250,000 from the Paul Allen Foundation.

Insisting that the Urban League is "trying to honor the integrity of what the occupation was," Rice says he's confident that the **museum** finally will come to fruition.

"In every struggle, there is a struggle," Rice said. "At the end of the day, I think everyone will be satisfied."

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