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Local News: Wednesday, February 26, 2003

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Deal reached to sell Colman School for less than half its value

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By [Keith Ervin](#)

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Brick, old-school charm, view. Complete renovation required. Space for 40 apartments, plus offices, **museum**. \$804,000. Preferred buyer only.

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Seattle **School** Board members are scheduled to vote next week on a deal that would sell the vacant **Colman** Elementary **School** building for less than one-half of its assessed value.

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The prospective buyer, the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle, previously negotiated a \$1.2 million purchase price with the **school** district, but a new round of negotiations knocked the price down by nearly one-third.

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Urban League leaders said it was necessary to renegotiate the deal because inspection of the **school** showed that the cost of removing hazardous materials would be significantly higher than originally thought.

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The group's president, James Kelly, who has been a strong supporter of the **school** district and Superintendent Joseph Olchefske, wants to develop a \$16 million "Urban League Village" with an African-American history **museum**, offices, and apartments in the three-story building that overlooks Rainier Valley.

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Kelly, a board member of the district's fund-raising partner, the Alliance for Education, has strongly supported public schools, and came to Olchefske's defense last fall when the superintendent was under fire for the district's \$35 million in accounting errors.

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The 103-year-old **Colman** building has been boarded up since 1985, when students were moved to the new Thurgood Marshall Elementary two blocks away.

Community activists occupied the building for eight years to dramatize their demands that the building be turned into an African-American Heritage **Museum**.

The **school** district agreed in 1997 year to sell the building to those activists for \$471,000, but the deal fell apart as activists feuded over leadership of the **museum** organization. The Urban League came forward as a prospective buyer in 2000.

The **School** Board decided to negotiate a deal with the Urban League rather than sell the 1.8-acre property on the open market.

School district and Urban League executives defended the latest version of the agreement, which was made public yesterday.

"Nobody wants any preferential treatment, we only want fair treatment," Kelly said. Given the need to clean up asbestos, lead-based paint, pigeon droppings and other hazardous materials, he joked, "You should pay us to take care of those things."

Asked if the purchase agreement could be viewed as a sweetheart deal, Olchefske said, "I don't think it is in any major sense of the term."

Negotiating exclusively with a nonprofit group for purchase of a surplus **school** is "absolutely consistent" with deals the district previously reached with El Centro de la Raza and the Delridge Neighborhood Association, he said.

When the district negotiated its first deal with the Urban League, an appraisal by Bellevue-based Bruce C. Allen & Associates pegged the property's value at \$1.7 million but reduced that amount by the estimated \$500,000 cost of removing asbestos and other hazardous materials.

The district and the Urban League reopened negotiations after the league's private development partner, the firm Barrientos, reported high costs for removing hazardous materials.

The Urban League also found it would have to negotiate access with adjacent landowners.

Mark Green, the district's general counsel, said the district lowered the \$1.2 million price to \$804,000 in three ways: increasing the allowance for hazardous-material cleanup, giving the Urban League a \$60,000 credit for defending lawsuits challenging the property sale, and dropping the price below the adjusted appraisal.

The deal would allow the Urban League to pay only 90 percent of the appraised price, the lowest amount the district can legally accept under state law.

Paul Chiles, president of commercial real-estate firm Chiles& Co. and president of the Urban League board, said district negotiators drove a hard bargain.

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"I can tell you that every inch in that negotiation with the **school** district, to recede from the original amount was a struggle and it had to be validated," Chiles said. "They were very, very tough negotiators, and I wouldn't want anyone to believe they weren't being judicious with the public dollars."

The purchase price is also below the King County assessor's \$2 million assessed valuation of the **Colman** property. That valuation for the 2003 tax year is based on a land value of \$788,220 and building value of \$1.3 million.

Lynn Gering, the county's chief appraiser, said the land value was based on market value but that the building value was based on a commercially available cost-estimating system.

Michael Christ, president of Bellevue-based Seco Development, said it is difficult to determine the value of older, neglected buildings which are costly to restore.

He welcomed the Urban League deal, saying, "Something had to happen with that building. It's a liability now. It's a handsome building. It would be nice to see it put to good use."

School Board President Nancy Waldman could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Lawsuits challenging the Urban League's pending purchase of the building have been filed by members of the original African-American Heritage **Museum** board.

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