


Africatown CLT and Equity Now Coalition featured in Puget Sound Business Journal

Posted by [Cashayla Rodgers](#) | 24 - Jul - 2020

Homeless shelter provider Mary's Place left a Seattle building after only about two months when a Black-led consortium demanded the owner of the Central District property transfer the lease to the group.

The owner, Bellevue-based Shelter Holdings, said it has put its plans to redevelop the former Keiro Northwest nursing home property, 1601 E. Yesler Way, on hold. The company said this will allow it to explore the possibility of a sale, at cost, to a community-based organization.

Japanese Americans founded Keiro in the late 1970s. Shelter Holdings bought the property late last year for \$11 million and began planning a mid-rise, 285-unit mixed-use apartment building.

Mary's Place said it spent about \$250,000 to make the full-block property a shelter and moved in in May. The shelter moved out June 30, the day before the Black-Led, Community-Based Housing Insecure Consortium said it wanted to move in.

"This site makes sense as a focal point of the resurgence of the Black community... as it is adjacent to the iconic Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute and one block from the Black-owned Bryant Manor Apartments and Pratt Fine Arts Center," Wyking Garrett, president of the Africatown Community Land Trust, said in an email to the Business Journal.

He noted the Black community is "reeling from the economic effects of decades of systemic racism and now COVID."

The consortium includes the Africatown trust, which acquires and develops land in Seattle to empower and preserve the Black community.

Fourteen families were living in the Keiro when Mary's Place vacated the property. Mary's Place said all were moved to other shelters that the group operates.

Mary's Place said in an email it vacated "because the building's future was uncertain (so) we prioritized the privacy and stability of our guests..." The building is now empty.

The consortium had told Mary's Place in an email that it would ensure the transfer of the property to the consortium would be "smooth, peaceful and seamless" for residents of the shelter.

Mary's Place said it is "open to partnering with a Black-led community-based organization to provide shelter services in the building" and noted that more than three-quarters of the people it serves are people of color.

The consortium's demands came in mid-June in emails generated by the website of King County Equity Now, which Africatown sponsors.

"Predatory developer Shelter Holding's presence, development aims, refusal to accept proposals by Black-led community-based organizations, and decision to collude with Mary's Place a white-led, corporate-backed nonprofit that's neither rooted nor based in the Central District is always unacceptable, particularly in these times. We will not stand for it," states the email to Eric Evans of Shelter Holdings and Mary's Place Executive Director Marty Hartman.

The email said Shelter Holdings must invest \$5 million in the Keiro property for "short-term activation of the space by the consortium," and attend a forum on how the company "can and must serve as a true ally in support of equitable development on this property and more broadly."

Garrett said Africatown wants to use the building as a shelter and "maximize community impact, healing, restoration, economic empowerment and anti-displacement."

He added the group is launching a community planning process to create a development vision that honors groups that have been displaced from the Central District. These include Native American, Japanese and Pan Asian and Black communities.

The first meeting is scheduled for 12:30 p.m. July 29. People can register [here](#).

The email generated by the King County Equity Now website also states that Mary's Place must "terminate Hartman or she must immediately resign."

It went on to demand that corporate funders of Mary's Place must be halted until Mary's Place "interrogates its predatory practices, reflects on this instance and implements responsive structural change."

The email called on Amazon, which developed a Mary's Place shelter in a new office building, to reallocate existing Mary's Place donations into the consortium for near- and long-term development of the Keiro property.

Africatown's demands came as a surprise to Shelter Holdings. The development company was copied on an April email from Garrett to elected officials asking them to work with the land trust to help transfer ownership of Keiro to the Black community, including providing capital to buy the property.

But the first time Shelter Holdings said it had direct contact with Africatown was June 15, and the following day the form emails started arriving.

Shelter Holdings said it is awaiting a specific capital proposal from Africatown on the purchase of the property. That will determine the next steps, Shelter Holdings said in an email.

Garrett said Africatown was encouraged that Shelter Holdings decided to halt development of the Keiro property and sell it to the Black community at cost.

"We think that Shelter Holdings can be a leader in their industry in divesting from projects in our community that accelerate displacement and perpetuate the current Jim Crow apartheid socio-economic reality, to make space for a new normal rooted in equity," Garrett wrote in an email.

Three years ago, Africatown with support from the nonprofit Forterra, struck a deal with a private development company, Lake Union Partners, to acquire a fifth of the large Midtown Center development property at 23rd Avenue and East Union Street in the Central District.

Around 130 units affordable housing are planned. Garrett said financing has been lined up, and the project is moving toward a fall 2021 groundbreaking.

More recently, the city of Seattle said it will transfer the decommissioned Fire Station 6 at 23rd Avenue and East Yesler Way to Africatown, which is planning a cultural enterprise and innovation center named for Black pioneer William Grose.