

businessman named William Grose opened a restaurant, hotel and barbershop in frontier-era Seattle and eventually settled the first African-American enclave in the Pacific Northwest.

Today's Central District activists are looking to continue Grose's legacy as the city's first Black landowner, via a community land trust – a nonprofit entity that collectively owns and holds property for community uses like housing. “We need a new normal rooted in equity,” said K. Wyking Garrett, president and CEO of the Africatown Community Land Trust. “And equity means ownership.”

Garrett boomed that message through a megaphone as he stood outside of a decommissioned fire station two blocks away. Back in 2016, the city promised to turn the publicly-owned Fire Station 6 building into the William Grose Center for Enterprise and Cultural Innovation, a hub for small-business development designed to grow the city's next generation of Black entrepreneurs. That redevelopment proposal is part of the planning department's Equitable Development Implementation Plan, a 2016 vision to leverage publicly-owned properties to benefit communities facing displacement amidst Seattle's breathtaking economic and population boom of the 2010s.

The hope was steering such projects into the Central District would help existing residents resist the tide of gentrification that's swept over the area: The neighborhood demographics have shifted from 70% Black in the 1970s to less than 20% today, with many families moving to South King County. But like all too many planning documents, the equitable development scheme sat on a shelf for four years with no action. Fire Station 6 sat vacant, its surface lot a home for parking enforcement vehicles.

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Seizing on the energy from the ongoing protests over police brutality and a growing awareness of the pandemic's disproportionate impact on communities of color, Garrett and a constellation of educators, lawyers, and activists are calling for an end to foot-dragging on the Fire Station 6 proposal – and on several other parcels of underutilized public land. Their campaign, "King County Equity Now," sets forth several demands for handing over vacant lots, a nursing home, and other properties to Black community ownership, in addition to establishing a \$500 million anti-gentrification land acquisition fund. The long-term goal: racially equitable outcomes in metrics like homeownership, wealth, and college attainment in King County by 2038, the 75th anniversary of MLK's "I Have a Dream" speech.

"Ownership is something that has been denied since our ancestors were looted and brought over here as someone else's equity, someone else's property," Garrett told CityLab. To his mind, operating an enterprise center while the city still owns the building is a non-starter. "Land ownership is control, which determines what happens on the land. If the city puts you there, they can take you off."

The Africatown Land Trust was started in 2016 to tap into that power: securing key parcels for affordable housing and small business space to ensure that Black residents of the Central District can prosper. But while the trust has had some successes in acquiring land, it's always done so by partnering with larger white-led philanthropies and nonprofits. In 2017, a land conservancy bought a 20% equity stake in the primed-for-redevelopment Midtown Center strip mall, the last bastion of Black-owned businesses in the neighborhood, on behalf of Africatown. In 2019, Garrett cut the ribbon on the Liberty Bank Building, 115 units of affirmatively marketed affordable housing on the site of the first Black-owned bank west of the Mississippi, which his grandfather co-founded. A local heavy hitter in nonprofit real estate development lent its balance sheet to see that project through.

Now the trust is ready to evolve past these partnerships, and it sees the transfer of publicly-owned land as essential to that cause. "The government keeps saying you don't have a balance

sheet so you need to partner with a larger organization,” Garrett said. “Our goal is to be put on par so we wouldn’t need to partner if we have a fund that can provide a guarantee.”

The urgency around equitable development in the Central District is clear. The teach-in occupied a rare patch of real estate in the neighborhood: an undeveloped parking lot. Across the street, construction workers have nearly put the finishing touches on a new 530-unit apartment building in a mixed-used complex developed by late Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen’s real estate firm. It replaced a beloved grocery store known for its reliable supply of soul food ingredients. The redevelopment of low-rise parcels in the Central District by companies like Vulcan is a familiar gentrification story in once-redlined, now-desirable neighborhoods around the country, but one that has taken a supercharged pace in Seattle, the fastest growing big city of the last decade. The new housing is much needed to accommodate a growing citywide population, but much of the development in the Central District has come at the expense of African-American homeowners, renters, and business owners.

Land trusts have a long history as a tool for racial equity: New Communities, Inc. in Georgia, widely credited as the nation’s first community land trust, was founded in 1969 as an outgrowth of the 1960s civil rights movement. “If you want to have a rooted community, it takes land to make that happen,” said Tony Pickett, CEO of community land trust advocates Grounded Solutions Network. “It is not just about figuring out how to modify police policy and procedure. If we really want to benefit African Americans in this country, it goes back to that promise for 40 acres and a mule. You need some kind of stake in the game.”

Demanding, rather than asking nicely, has precedent in the history of community land trusts. In the late 1980s, the Dudley Neighbors Community Land Trust in Boston launched its Take a Stand, Own the Land campaign, gaining control of more than 62 acres of property in the Roxbury and North Dorchester neighborhoods. More recently, the housing advocacy group Moms 4 Housing occupied a vacant East Bay home to dramatize Oakland’s severe affordability crisis; their actions eventually led the Oakland Community Land Trust to purchase the house this year.

In Seattle, Garrett looks at the recent Amazon-driven property boom that reshaped the Seattle skyline – including the Central District main drag, 23rd Avenue – and laments that there is not a single Black-owned real estate developer, architecture firm, or general contractor working at scale to land some of these lucrative design and construction contracts. “That’s an indictment, not just of our community, but of all of the building happening in Seattle,” Garrett said. He envisions the future William Grose Center as a business incubator that would ensure such a scenario does not repeat itself during the city’s next boom.

“It would be the epicenter of the Africatown cultural innovation district. It will incubate, monitor, and steward an ecosystem based on the genius and the entrepreneurial and creative spirit that has always existed in this community, which drives popular culture and gave Seattle its musical legacy,” he said. “It can be harnessed and connected with opportunities in the broader knowledge-based economy.”

As protests triggered by the killing of George Floyd continue in Seattle, Garrett’s campaign to connect the land trust’s campaign with the larger struggle for racial equity appears to be paying off: On June 12, the city abruptly announced it would transfer the fire station to the trust. “We at the City of Seattle understand the urgency behind making bold investments in the Black community and increasing community ownership of land in the Central District,” the city said in a statement.

On Monday, June 15, a few days ahead of a Juneteenth march that brought thousands to the Central District, Garrett gathered in front of the building once again, flanked by a dozen local Black business owners who testified to the transformative potential an enterprise center could have. “Some of the smartest people in the world have been brought to Seattle working on how we build condos on the moon,” Garrett said, referring to the region’s aerospace cluster. “How do we facilitate communities growing and thriving in place? In Seattle, the intellectual and financial resources are present. There just has to be the will.”

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