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Colson Hotel plans call for transformation of historic structure into 'space for community and ideas,' with focus on young people

July 24, 2025 by Rachel Brown Hackney, Editor & Publisher

**Sarasota City Commission gets update from member of group that saved building from demolition**



This is a view of the Colson Hotel from the exterior. Image courtesy City of Sarasota

As a result of outreach to city residents, the group of organization leaders who have been involved in saving the historic Colson Hotel from demolition has begun focusing on the property's future use "as a space for community and ideas," the Sarasota City Commission learned this week.

On July 21, during the commission's regular meeting, Anand Pallegar, founder of the Sarasota nonprofit [DreamLarge](#), provided an update about the property.

He thanked the commissioners for making it possible to save the structure, which its prior owner, Max Vollmer of JDMAX Developments LLC of Tampa, wanted to tear down because of its poor condition and the expense that would have been necessary to renovate it for use in a project Vollmer planned next to it.

[In April 2024](#), the city's Historic Preservation Board voted unanimously to deny Vollmer's application to demolish the Colson Hotel, which dates to 1926, as noted in city documents. Vollmer appealed that decision to the City Commission.

In early September 2024, after conducting their public hearing, the commissioners directed city staff "to expeditiously negotiate reasonable variances" from the City Code, to enable the restoration and future financial viability of the Colson Hotel, which stands at 1425 Eighth St.



This graphic shows the location of the hotel near downtown Sarasota. Image courtesy City of Sarasota

During the Sept. 3, 2024 public hearing, Clifford Smith, the senior planner with the city who handled historic preservation issues, explained that the hotel was the first such structure in Sarasota built for African American guests during the Jim Crow era. "This allowed for people to have a safe and welcoming place to stay in the city," he pointed out.

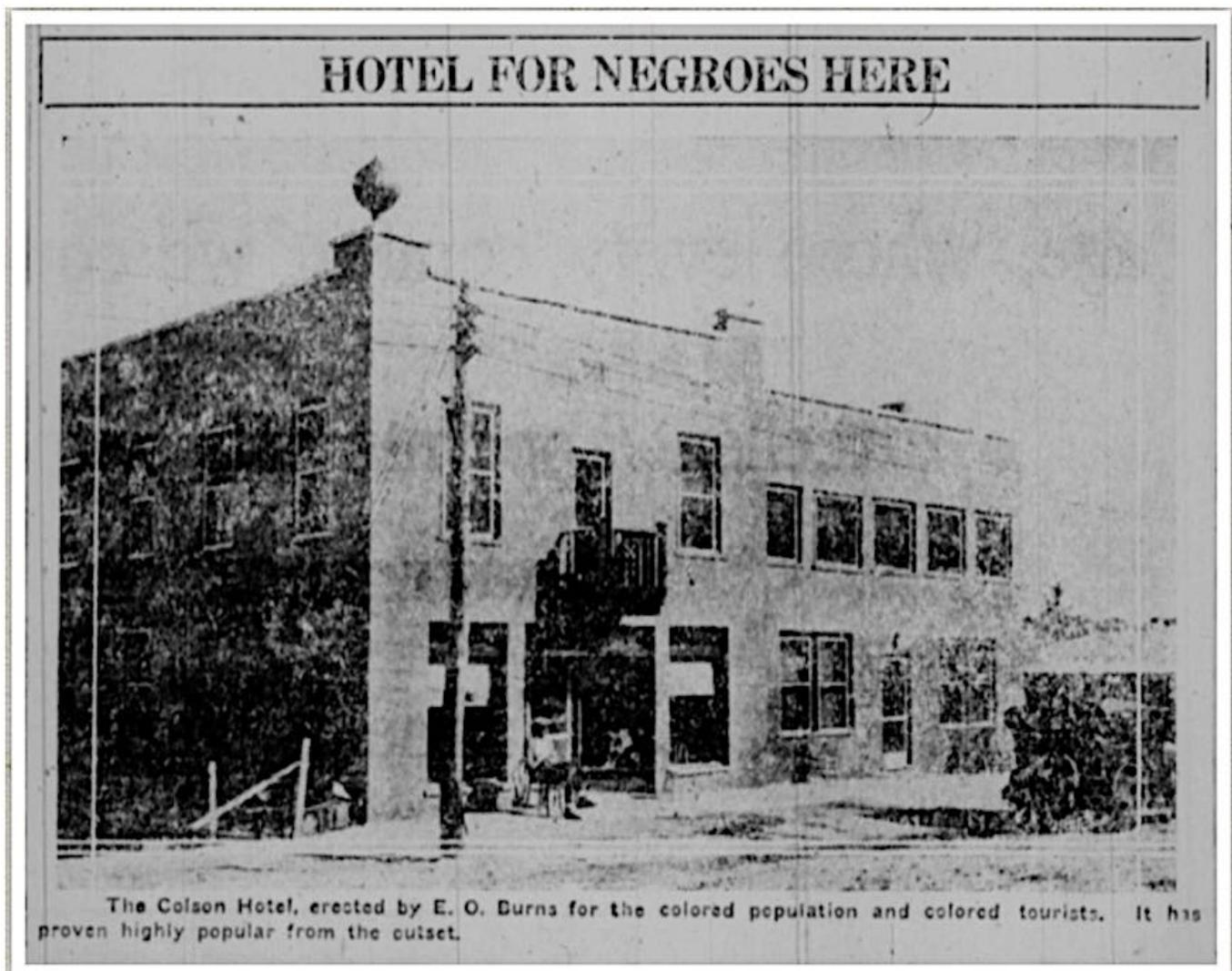
Smith died late last year.

Pallegar told the commissioners that same day that the group organized to save the hotel included the [Sarasota Alliance for Historic Preservation](#), the Sarasota African American Cultural Coalition, and the [Gulf Coast Community Foundation](#), which is based in Venice. Their goal was to see the building restored, Pallegar added. "I think this is probably ... one of the, if not the, most important buildings

in Sarasota in this moment in time," he said.

During his July 21 remarks, Pallegar reported, "We're calling the initiative the Colson Collective." This is an opportunity, he continued, "to really change the narrative for young people in the community."

"One hundred years ago," when the hotel was constructed, Pallegar pointed out, Sarasota residents were Black and white. "Today, it is shades of brown and white. ... We need to create spaces that help incubate tomorrow's ideas, tomorrow's creatives ... while ensuring we preserve the original intent of the hotel, what it stood for, and be able to tell that story."



(above): Colson Hotel. Courtesy Sarasota Historical Resources.

### The Colson Hotel

- The Colson Hotel built by Owen Burns and named after Mr. Colson.
- African Americans stayed at the hotel because they could not book rooms at white hotels in Sarasota.
- The facility was a 28-room hotel for black tourists and residents.
- The hotel was constructed in 1925.

(above): The Colson Hotel, named after Lewis Colson, was built by E.O. Burns. The hotel was constructed for African American travelers and residents. Courtesy Sarasota County Historical Resources.

### Little known history

- The Colson Hotel was renamed The Palms Hotel.
- Lewis Colson and his wife Irene are the only African Americans buried in Rosemary Cemetery just ½ block west.
- Today, it's latest use was a rooming house, before being purchased by a developer on Mar 1, 2023.
- The Colson Hotel is a significant structure to Sarasota History and faces development pressure

This is part of the documentation of the historic value of the hotel, provided by historian Charles Burks of Sarasota to city staff. Image courtesy City of Sarasota

In response to a question from Commissioner Jen Ahearn-Koch, Pallegar said, "We want to protect the younger people in this community ... Right now, if you were trying to start something in Sarasota, I really don't know whether that path exists."

When she then asked whether plans call for keeping all of the original 28 rooms, he replied that, to provide for gatherings and special events — including performances by jazz ensembles, for example — it would be likely that only 24 of the rooms would be kept.

The members of the group focused on the future of the Colson Hotel, he explained, had realized that, "quite frankly, by adaptively repurposing it, you lose the original intent, and it's hard to connect the dots that this once was a place of refuge for the Black community during an era of segregation. And that's really the story we want to preserve."

"I think it sounds like a great concept," Mayor Liz Alpert told Pallegar.

Vice Mayor Debbie Trice asked when the group anticipates starting a capital campaign for the structure's future use.

Pallegar told her that that process has begun. In fact, he noted, the Gulf Coast Community Foundation has a [project fund webpage on its website](#).

### **'A volunteer effort'**

At the outset of his remarks, Pallegar pointed out, "This has been a long journey to understand and protect the asset that was named for Irene and Lewis Colson."

Kafi Benz of Sarasota, president of Friends of "Seagate," noted prior to the April 2024 Historic Preservation Board meeting that Lewis Colson was the first free Black American to settle in Sarasota. Employed by the Florida Land Company, Colson "participated in the initial survey of the community," she wrote. "In 1884, he drove the primary stake that would be used in that process. He and Irene Colson, his wife, donated the land to establish Bethlehem Baptist Church, at which he would serve as pastor from 1899 to 1915."

Benz also asserted that "this hotel is among the last vestiges of the Black community that thrived as 'Overtown' on both sides of Sarasota's Central Avenue to the north of Fruitville Road. So little evidence of that vibrant and prosperous community remains, that its historical site sign that one encounters along Avenue of the Arts seems incongruous to what has been renamed 'Rosemary' and is developing as a chic enclave in downtown."

On July 21, Pallegar told the commissioners, "Never doubt that a group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

These are the organizations that have been involved in the effort to save the building and repurpose it.  
Image courtesy City of Sarasota

The Gulf Coast Community Foundation provided funds to assist the effort to save the hotel, he noted, and “the Rosemary District as a whole — the entire community — has been very supportive.”

Pallegar also credited the support of the Sarasota African American Cultural Coalition and the Sarasota Alliance for Historic Preservation.

It took 18 months of negotiations with Vollmer of JDMAX before the historic structure could be purchased, Pallegar said. The transaction occurred on March 1.

The entity that holds the property title is called Save Sarasota Historic Properties, he added. It was established by [Barry Preston, vice president of the Sarasota Alliance for Historic Preservation](#), Pallegar said.

Save Sarasota Historic Properties is a means of holding assets until they are ready for future use, Pallegar pointed out.

Preston also provided a loan for the group of organizations working to save the hotel, to help them acquire the property, Pallegar added.

This slide shows how one area of the interior looked before it was cleaned out. Image courtesy City of Sarasota

Showing the commissioners a series of slides of the interior of the structure after it was purchased from JDMAX, Pallegar noted, "It obviously had been left abandoned for a while. People had broken into it."

He laughingly said that one of the slides reminded him of a scene in the movie *The Shining*, which was based on a Stephen King novel.

This is the view of the interior, before the cleanup, that Anand Pallegar said reminded him of a scene in *The Shining*. Image courtesy City of Sarasota

"Ultimately, thanks to a group of volunteers," Pallegar continued, "we were able to clean the place out."

Vice Mayor Debbie Trice helped out that day, he noted. "We filled a dumpster and a dump trailer ..."

While the group was conducting community outreach on the structure's future, Pallegar continued, two ideas emerged: a hotel and a jazz club.

"What we realized very quickly," he said, "is that by taking the original building and converting it into a hotel or a jazz club, it would require significant adaptive reuse principles. We would have to take down walls," for example, and add new plumbing. "And the legacy ... would be lost. Sure, on the exterior, it would be the Colson Hotel. But on the inside, that story would potentially have been lost."

On a side note, Pallegar told the commissioners that although the hotel reportedly was constructed by [Owen Burns](#), one of the most prominent

developers in Sarasota in the 1920s, it was actually Burns' brother, Edwin Oscar Burns, who built the hotel.

Pallegar also presented the board members slides showing 1930 Census data listing the people living at the hotel, plus their professions. Some were identified as private families, for example, while others were reported to be "filling station attendants," and chefs.

This is a section of the 1930 Census records that Anand Pallegar showed the city commissioners. Image courtesy City of Sarasota

Commissioner Ahean-Koch noted that she could see "circus" written by a couple of the names.

"What we took away from this," Pallegar said, "is that, really, it's very clear that in this era of history, Sarasota was divided between Black and white, and this [hotel] became a safe haven. ... These [residents of the hotel] are the people that

built the foundation of what Sarasota represents. We thought about ways that we could preserve that intent” and capture their story for future generations.

This slide shows a concept for a restored hotel room in the building. Image courtesy City of Sarasota

Commissioner Kathy Kelley Ohlrich was among the commissioners who thanked Pallegar and his colleagues in the group for their efforts. She then asked that he keep the board members “updated on a pretty regular basis” in regard to the plans for the Colson Hotel.

“We all know the importance of preserving history,” Commissioner Kyle Battie told Pallegar, “especially African American history in Sarasota.” Battie suggested that Pallegar talk with Nate Jacobs, founder of the Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe, calling the Troupe “one of the most grassroots organizations in this city.” Battie referenced [the WBTT’s success in a capital campaign for its facilities](#).

“It really is a volunteer effort,” Pallegar stressed of the many people working on the Colson Hotel plans.

To contribute to the fund for preserving the Colson Hotel and transforming it into space for future use, visit <https://dreamlarge.co/SAVETHECOLSON>.

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Tinypass

< After request regarding Siesta stormwater maintenance, following May 12 flooding, county Public Works staff provides Siesta Key Beautification Alliance leader more than 900 pages of reports

> Contractor's crew breaks sewer force main near Lorraine Road-Bee Ridge Road intersection, leading to spill of 7,000 gallons of sewage

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