

Habitat founder and board disagree on his retirement date: Conflict over leadership styles

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Millard Fuller, who founded the world-renowned Christian housing ministry Habitat for Humanity International with his wife, Linda, in 1976, will end his service as president next year. But Fuller and Habitat directors have been in conflict for several months over how and when the leadership transition will take place.

While retaining the title of president and chief executive officer, Fuller, who turns 70 in January, said he has been forced into a “figurehead” role since former board chairman Paul Leonard Jr. came to the Americus, Georgia-based headquarters in June as managing director.

During the past year, Fuller was accused of improper behavior toward a former employee, but a rigorous board investigation found “insufficient proof of inappropriate conduct,” according to an August 25 memo to Habitat employees.

However, broader issues of leadership styles and transition procedures have been the primary sources of conflict between Fuller and the board, chaired by Baltimore attorney Rey Ramsey. Board leaders claim that Fuller led in the development of the Global Village and Discovery Center, which showcases Habitat’s approach to building homes in various nations, without board approval.

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, a longtime Habitat volunteer and personal friend of the Fullers, has intervened to negotiate a resolution. He hosted a May 21 meeting of Habitat leaders at his home in Plains, Georgia, and afterward made recommendations that were developed by board leaders into a document signed by the Fullers that called for Millard’s retirement in January 2005.

A subsequent meeting was held at the Carter Center in Atlanta August 23 after Fuller and board leaders continued to disagree over current leadership issues and a

succession plan. Recommendations stemming from that meeting were approved in a called meeting of the full Habitat board the next day.

In the August 25 memo to Habitat employees, board leaders called Leonard's appointment as managing director "a first step in an important process the board will be engaged in over the coming months."

At this time, however, Fuller has not publicly announced his retirement. He has sought to extend his term as Habitat's first president and CEO until later in 2005 when the completion of the 200,000th house built by the worldwide ministry is expected to occur.

Fuller said early minutes from the founding of Habitat in 1976 referred to a goal of housing 1 million people. That goal would be symbolized by finishing the 200,000th house. Board leaders have offered Fuller the opportunity to preside over the dedication of that historic milestone, but not in the role of CEO. -*John Pierce, Associated Baptist Press*