

LOCAL

These people have coffins under their yards. Now they have to move.

Archaeologists from USF searched through part of Robles Park Village with ground-penetrating radar.
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TAMPA, Fla. — The 96 residents at a public housing development who learned last week that close to 130 coffins from Tampa's first Black cemetery still existed in their yards are preparing to move.

The **Tampa Housing Authority** plans to move the residents out of five buildings at Robles Park Village so that more archaeological work can be done and so the site of the forgotten Zion Cemetery can be turned into a memorial.

"I think whenever you got to move, you got that anxiety because you got to uplift, you have to move and then you have to worry about where you going to move to," said Michael Randolph, who currently lives in Robles Park Village. "So those are the things I think are going consistently through residents: 'Wow, I got to go and where do I go?'"

The Tampa Bay Times first reported in June that hundreds of graves from the old Zion Cemetery of the early 1900s along North Florida Avenue were unaccounted for, and could still be underneath part of the housing development. The investigation also prompted immediate action from the housing authority, including relocations and an archaeological search of the site.

10News was there when archaeologists from USF and Cardno searched through part of Robles Park Village with ground-penetrating radar. On Friday, archaeologists released the findings of their research, confirming close to 130 coffin-shaped anomalies underground at the housing complex.

"I think everyone felt emotional," said THA COO Leroy Moore. "There's still that, you know, in many of our stomachs about actually seeing these radar images reflective of people that were laid to rest still there."

In the early 1950s when the Tampa Housing Authority was building Robles Park Village, construction crews paved over the Zion Cemetery graves. This is despite finding three caskets on the site.

"Looking at the time period, an attitude toward black lives in general back then, I'm not surprised they...built something over here, because as you know, we was considered to be trash, objects. Things that's not important. So, I'm frustrated because of that," said Randolph. "And to add insult to injury, to say this is the first Black cemetery and that these units were built over top of it with no respect, so that frustrated me as well. So that's why I'm glad the housing authority is moving on this..."

On Monday, Moore said his agency will hold meetings Tuesday and Wednesday to present a draft of the relocation plan to the 96 affected residents. Those residents will be allowed to give input on the plan, and will ultimately be given three options: move to another unit in Robles, move to another public housing complex or receive a Section 8 voucher.

Relocations are expected to start in the next 30-60 days.