

INFLUENCE

Janet Cruz calls for state task force to identify remains at forgotten Zion Cemetery

The site contains the graves of at least 120 African Americans.

Florida Politics, By Janelle Irwin Taylor on September 5, 2019

State Sen. Janet Cruz is taking action on behalf of hundreds of African Americans who died in Tampa more than a century ago.

Following a Tampa Bay Times investigation this summer, the Tampa Democrat filed a bill Wednesday to create a task force to study unmarked and long-forgotten graves at the former Zion Cemetery that now serves as a backyard to **Robles Park Village public housing** in Tampa Heights.

Her bill (SB 220) would allocate \$500,000 to study the remains at the 2.5-acre segregation-era burial ground. Of that money, \$50,000 would pay for a historical monument to honor the deceased buried there — and then lost for a century. The rest would cover funeral and reinternment costs for next of kin of those buried at the site.

The Times investigation in June found death certificates for 382 people buried at the site between 1913 and 1920, but because record-keeping during that time was not as thorough as it was for white burials, there could be even more.

Radar images taken last month identified 120 coffins at the site.

Cruz's bill references the "millions" of slaves throughout the U.S. until the end of the Civil War as well as ongoing discrimination that included segregating burial sites for African Americans.

"Unlike predominantly white cemeteries and burial grounds, African American cemeteries and burial grounds were not subject to regulations and record-keeping necessary to protect the dignity of the deceased," her bill reads. "As a result, many abandoned African American cemeteries and burial grounds have been inadvertently discovered following years of disrepair and neglect when land is being redeveloped or has been sold."

The prescribed task force studying abandoned African American cemeteries would work under the purview of the Department of State. It would include the Secretary of State (or their designee) as well as representatives from the Bureau of Archaeological Research, the Florida NAACP, the Florida Council of Churches, the Florida African American Heritage Preservation Network, the Florida Public Archaeology Network and one representative from the cemetery industry.

"Creating a task force to identify cemeteries in Florida that were abandoned or built over, like Zion Cemetery, is an important step to make sure all those who made Florida what it is today are honored and respected," Cruz said. "All human remains are afforded equal protection under Florida law. Equal protection and respect were not a reality experienced by those buried at Zion Cemetery and so many other African American Floridians. I am proud to sponsor this important legislation to make sure those who shaped the history of our state are honored and memorialized properly."

The group would meet for the first time Aug. 1, 2020 and continue meeting as many times as necessary to accomplish its goals.

Those goals include identifying remains and forming suggestions for finding relatives who can then reintern and memorialize their lost family members.

The task force would work with the University of South Florida to identify remains. Exhumed bodies would remain in USF's custody until family members were identified and notified.

Family members could be reimbursed up to \$7,500 for funeral, burial and grave marker expenses. That amount can also be payable directly to a funeral provider. Charitable contributions for reburial and funeral-related services are not reimbursable.

Cruz's bill does not yet have a companion in the House.

