

HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY

New bill calls for bodies at Zion Cemetery to be dug up, not everyone is supportive

Tampa Housing Authority are not totally supportive of the bill that would take a deeper look at Zion Cemetery.
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TAMPA, Fla. — The discovery of close to 130 coffins from Tampa's first black cemetery has prompted action from a local state legislator who wants to see a state task force formed, bodies exhumed and reimbursements to descendants of those buried at the site.

Sen. Janet Cruz filed SB 220 this week after a Tampa Bay Times investigation helped lead the Tampa Housing Authority to find the coffins from the forgotten Zion Cemetery.

The coffins are underneath the Robles Park Village public housing development, which overlaps with the cemetery. During the construction of Robles Park Village in the 1950s, construction crews found three caskets on-site, but historical records provided no evidence of any further investigation. Crews continued on with construction over the cemetery site.



The bill calls for a partnership with the University of South Florida for a deeper investigation of the Zion Cemetery that would include exhuming bodies and offering financial support to descendants of those interred at the cemetery for costs related to reinterment, grave markers and funerals.

When they learned about the cemetery, the **Tampa Housing Authority** immediately brought in archaeologists who used ground-penetrating radar to search the site. The agency also decided to start the relocation process for 96 residents living within the cemetery boundaries where bodies were found.

Despite expressing disappointment at previous administrations' lack of concern for the Zion site, and despite immediate action taken upon discovery of a cemetery, housing authority officials are not totally supportive of the new bill.

Tampa Housing Authority COO Leroy Moore said in a statement to 10News:

THA was not consulted on this but we appreciate and respect our elected officials wanting to create a process for identifying statewide such "lost" African American cemeteries. We however don't agree that in the case of ZION the cemetery should be moved as it seems to suggest in the Bill. This seems to be an intact cemetery, furthermore the site itself, even without human remains, is of historical importance to Tampa being the City's first such cemetery. The expressed belief that... "once a cemetery, always a cemetery" we think stands for Zion. We have no desire to want to remove and reinter people who were laid to rest over 100 years ago. This site is best suitable in our opinion for re-assembly under one ownership and preserved as historic Zion cemetery. And we hope that the owners can all come to agreement on that goal and work to achieve that result. We will be offering to Janet Cruz some suggestions now that we know about this proposed Bill. And hope that the language can be revised to recognize that in some instances it should allow for the preservation of such cemeteries or former cemeteries. Perhaps by creating a reacquisition vehicle which can reacquire such lands for preservation and memorialization of Zion and similar such found cemeteries.