

## Should bodies remain at Zion Cemetery? Bill aims to bring descendants into debate.

*Leaving bodies in place at the forgotten Africa-American burial ground may not be a decision for the Housing Authority to make, Cruz said.*

Tampa Bay Times, [Paul Guzzo](#) | Published September 5, 2019

TAMPA — The **Tampa Housing Authority** acted quickly to deal with the possibility that one of its apartment complexes was built on land where the city's African-American community once buried its dead.

The authority hired an archaeology team, more than 120 caskets have been detected so far, and plans have been announced to relocate apartment residents and turn the property into a memorial park.

But now, state Sen. Janet Cruz is saying: Not so fast.

Leaving the bodies in place at forgotten Zion Cemetery may not be a decision for the Housing Authority to make, Cruz said Thursday.

"They haven't reached out to any next of kin," she said. "It's their decision."

If relatives are found, the prospect of moving bodies promises to be a costly one, according to the team that used ground-penetrating radar to detect the caskets. They were located 4 to 6 feet underground at the Robles Park Village apartment complex on North Florida Avenue.

An early map of Zion shows room for more than 800 bodies. Moving anywhere near that number would cost millions of dollars, said the team's leader, Eric Prendergast, with archaeological assessment company Cardno.

Still, Cruz filed a bill this week to help pay for the job with state funds and to create a task force to identify and protect other neglected or abandoned African-American cemeteries across the state.

The bill, and a planned House companion sponsored by Cruz' fellow Tampa Democrat Fentrice Driskell, would set aside \$450,000 to search for next of kin of those whose bodies remain at Zion Cemetery and to provide each family with up to \$7,500 for a funeral, re-interment and grave marker.

The bill also provides \$50,000 for a historic marker at the Zion site.

The 2½-acre cemetery was established in 1901 and stretches across the 3700 block of N Florida Ave., land that today is home to Robles Park Village and to warehouses and an old storefront owned by restaurateur Richard Gonzmart. Grave markers disappeared nearly a century ago.

The text of the Cruz bill says it was written in response to a series of reports by the *Tampa Bay Times* revealing the existence of Zion Cemetery and raising questions about whether the bodies were ever moved.

The reports also spurred the ground survey that revealed images of the caskets.

Under Florida law, "reasonable efforts" must be made to find people "who can establish connections" to an abandoned human burial.

To fulfill this requirement, the Housing Authority created the Zion Cemetery Archaeological Consultation Committee. Members are city officials, civil rights activists and residents of Robles Park Village.

The new bill adds to this requirement for Zion Cemetery, calling for the Florida Department of State to work with the University of South Florida on the best ways to find next of kin.



This image is a 3D laser scan of Robles Park Village showing grave-shaped objects beneath the ground in relation to buildings at the public housing complex. The single image is made from two data sources and aligns with historical maps of the former Zion Cemetery. [Cardno]

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Among the options for accomplishing this: Exhuming bodies to collect DNA for testing and leaving bodies in the ground while conducting genealogical research.

“There is no need to excavate any burials in order to identify next of kin,” said Rebecca O’Sullivan of the Florida Public Archaeology Network at USF, which is helping in the search for the Zion graves. “We have a list of burial records that can be used to identify next of kin through genealogy.”

In its research, the *Times* discovered 382 death certificates for people buried at Zion Cemetery and published the names in late June on the Internet and in print. Since then, no one has come forward to claim a relationship with them.

In followup research, cemetery historian Ray Reed said he found about 750 people reported to have been buried at Zion. He published the names on the Find A Grave website, and said no one has reached out to him, either.

Informed of the Cruz bill, the Housing Authority’s chief operating officer Leroy Moore said the agency has “no desire” to relocate people buried over 100 years ago.

“This site is best suitable in our opinion for re-assemblage under one ownership and preservation as historic Zion Cemetery,” Moore said.

He suggested, instead, that the state pay for the purchase of the former cemetery land so it can be turned into a memorial park.

After the announcement Aug. 30 that caskets had been discovered, Gonzmart told the *Times* he would confer with those conducting the survey for the Housing Authority before deciding his next steps.

On Thursday, Jeffrey Shannon, attorney for Gonzmart’s Columbia Restaurant Group, welcomed news that the bill had been introduced.

“It’s great that the state has taken an interest in this matter,” Shannon said. “This might provide assistance and perhaps some closure to descendants of those buried at Zion.”

Gonzmart purchased his share of the Zion land in 2016 for \$690,000 with the idea of building a culinary school there for people with low incomes. He did not know at the time that it was once a burial ground.

One suggestion raised during discussions before the Housing Authority was having the city of Tampa buy the former cemetery land.

Contacted Thursday, Ashley Bauman, spokeswoman for Mayor Jane Castor, dismissed that idea.

“We don’t think it’s appropriate for Zion Cemetery to be operated as a city park,” Bauman said. “The city of Tampa would support the formation of a non-profit to control and operate the memorial grounds.”

If descendants of those buried in Zion are located, and they signal overwhelmingly that they want their ancestors to remain on the site, Cruz would consider this option, she said.

The families weren’t presented any options when developers built on top the graves of their relatives, Cruz said.

“My intent,” she added, “is to make sure the families not respected then get their respect today.”