

Zion Cemetery is 'holy ground' so Housing Authority will move those living there

After talks with the tenant council and federal housing officials, and as the search for bodies continues, the agency has decided not to wait.

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TAMPA — Shaniquia King says her children, 2 and 4, are afraid to sleep knowing their apartment stands on land once occupied by Zion Cemetery — an early 20th century African-American burial ground.

As many as 800 people may have been buried there, but no one knows yet whether they were moved before a storefront, warehouses and part of the Robles Park Village apartments were built there through the years.

King was unnerved, too, when she learned that caskets may lie beneath her floors — not out of a fear of ghosts but concern that a sacred place for the city's black pioneers has been forgotten.

"This just feels wrong," said King, 25. "It makes me sad to be here."

She won't be there much longer.

The **Tampa Housing Authority**, owner of the apartments, announced at a tenants meeting Thursday that relocation will begin within two weeks for the 96 people who live in the five apartments built on Zion Cemetery land.

The *Tampa Bay Times* revealed the existence of the long-forgotten Zion Cemetery in a special report June 23 and the Housing Authority commissioned a search of its property.

Last week, the authority said finding just one casket would trigger relocation. But now, after talks with the Robles Park Tenant Council and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the agency has decided not to wait.



Robles Park resident Clark Simmons listens to a presentation by archaeologists during an informational meeting at Robles Park Village community center. The Tampa Housing Authority held the meeting to discuss Zion Cemetery. "JAMES BORCHUCK | Times" | Tampa Bay Times



Residents listen to a presentation by Senior Archaeologist Eric Prendergast during a meeting for residents at Robles Park Village community center Thursday, Aug. 22, 2019 in Tampa, FL. The housing authority held the meeting to discuss Zion Cemetery. "JAMES BORCHUCK | Times" | Tampa Bay Times

"It was holy ground," Leroy Moore, chief operating officer, told tenants attending the meeting at the Robles community center. "It should still be considered sacred."

The 2½ acres once occupied by the cemetery is split nearly evenly between Robles Park Village and restaurateur Richard Gonzmart, whose property along the 3700 block of N. Florida Ave. contains a warehouse and a vacant storefront.

The Housing Authority's portion will be turned into a memorial park managed by the city of Tampa when Robles Park Village is redeveloped in the coming years. The Housing Authority hopes Gonzmart also turns over his land for the memorial park.

Tenants cheered the announcement Thursday.

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"It is important to Tampa history," Moore told them. "We want to do the right thing and be respectful of that." All told, Robles Park Village now is home to 1,118 people in 483 units across 67 buildings.

Zion Cemetery, established in 1901, had room for some 800 burial plots plus a potters field for people who were indigent or unidentified.

It faded from public consciousness around a century ago and was parceled out for development.

The *Tampa Bay Times* discovered 382 death certificates for Zion. A cemetery historian claims to have found 747.

Three bodies in caskets were unearthed when Robles Park was built in 1951 but there is no sign anyone checked whether others also remained.

"This shouldn't have happened," Housing Authority president Jerome Ryans told tenants at Thursday's meeting. "It is regrettable. But now we have to deal with it. This is a tough situation."

The Housing Authority hired archaeologists to search the cemetery property for graves. Ground penetrating radar has turned up anomalies but determining whether they're graves requires more analysis.



Senior Archaeologist Eric Prendergast points out the boundaries of Zion Cemetery during an informational meeting for residents at Robles Park Village community center. "JAMES BORCHUCK | Times" | Tampa Bay Times

Tenants forced to move from the five buildings — two-thirds of them under 18 — can choose from among other public housing complexes or homes available through federal Section 8 vouchers.

Or they can move to one of the 30 homes that are vacant elsewhere in Robles Park Village.

Option No. 3 drew laughter at Thursday's meetings from those who live in the aging complex.

"We want to get out of here," tenant King said.

Still, she is nervous about a move.

"I don't know what to expect or where I will end up," she said. "It's overwhelming."

The Housing Authority is providing counselors — to those struggling to cope with a move as well as those disturbed at living on a cemetery.

"What bothers me is thinking of the people who were buried here," King said. "They didn't have a voice to stop something terrible."