Forgotten no more: State Senate OKs $100,000 for black cemetery memorials

They'll honor people buried at Zion and Ridgewood, Tampa cemeteries that were erased for development.

Tampa Bay Times, Paul Guzzo | Published Yesterday

TAMPA — For decades, those passing by the 3700 block of N. Florida Ave. had no idea that a black cemetery lies there, beneath a tow lot, warehouses and public housing.

Then in June, the Tampa Bay Times revealed that the area was home to the segregation-era Zion Cemetery, where some 800 people had likely been buried. Archaeologists later confirmed caskets remained in the ground.

Now, the state has taken a first step toward ensuring that everyone will know the history of Zion.

The Florida Senate on Wednesday moved to set aside $100,000 in the state budget for memorials at two forgotten burial grounds in Tampa — Zion Cemetery and Ridgewood Cemetery. Ridgewood was a mid-20th century pauper’s cemetery discovered in October on the campus of King High School. Most of those buried there were African Americans.

The Department of State would oversee the memorial projects, working with local leaders.

“This will allow our community to begin healing from this injustice,” said Sen. Janet Cruz, "and encourage our state to take the necessary steps to memorialize all who have contributed to Florida’s history, particularly those whose vital contributions have been overlooked for far too long.”

Cruz, a Tampa Democrat, worked on the measure with fellow Senate Democrats Darryl Rouson of St. Petersburg Minority Leader Audrey Gibson of Jacksonville.

“We stand united to fight for the forgotten in Tampa and all across the state of Florida,” Rouson said during a hearing on the measure, presented as an amendment to the state budget.

The same three senators also sponsored a bill, SB 220, to form a statewide task force that would work to preserve historic African American cemeteries. The bill was unanimously passed by the Governmental Oversight and Accountability Committee and awaits further action.

A companion bill in the House, HB 121, sponsored by Hillsborough Democratic Rep. Fentrice Driskell, has not yet passed a committee.

The moves in the Legislature come as teams of archaeologists are investigating whether there are other forgotten black burial sites in the Tampa Bay area. They have focused on reports of two in Clearwater, one on an Odessa horse ranch and another at MacDill Air Force Base.

Hillsborough County School Board member Tamara Shamburger said the school district is grateful for the coming memorial.

“The men, women and children buried in Ridgewood Cemetery were part of our community and we have to ensure their lives are not forgotten,” she said.

Funding for the monuments was also hailed by Leroy Moore, chief operating officer of the Tampa Housing Authority, owner of the Robles Park Village apartments that were built on top Zion Cemetery in the 1950s.
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Still, Moore said, “Whereas the monument funding is important, it is only a fraction of what it will take to unify ownership of the land, create the memorial park cemetery, and ensure long term protection and upkeep.”

The land that was Zion is divided among three owners today. The two largest lots are owned by the Housing Authority and restaurateur Richard Gonzmart, who operates a warehouse there, and a smaller lot is owned by Dennis Creech, who uses it for a vehicle tow lot.

The city of Tampa has pledged to work with state leaders in finding purchase money or land for a swap so the Zion property can be turned into a memorial park operated by a nonprofit.

Shamburger said the school is waiting on input from the Florida State Archaeologist before making any decisions on the next step for Ridgewood.