

Newly discovered Miami cemetery may become memorial park

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Leaders of a successful drive to save the recently discovered Lemon City Cemetery, a blacks-only burial ground dating back almost 100 years, are ready to celebrate.

Earlier this month, the city of Miami's preservation board designated the long-forgotten burial ground -- uncovered in April during construction of an affordable-housing complex -- as a historic site.

And on Wednesday, the city's Planning Advisory Board endorsed substantial changes to plans for the housing complex that will turn most of the old cemetery, where scores of Miami's early black settlers were buried, into a memorial park.

On Dec. 4, leaders of the drive will meet at the site in northwest Miami to plan a celebration and mark the start of a community effort to design an appropriate monument.

“We want to say thanks to everybody who helped us to make it happen, which includes the developers,” preservationist Enid Pinkney said. “This has been a lot of labor of love, and it's been all volunteer.”

The site's developers, Biscayne Housing Group and Carlisle Development, were unaware of the cemetery's existence until work crews discovered human bones and remnants of caskets in piles of dirt excavated for the first building's foundations. There is no legal record of the cemetery, and historians didn't know about it, either.

HUNDREDS OF NAMES

But research after the plot's re-discovery came up with hundreds of names of early black settlers, many of Bahamian extraction, who were buried there between the 1910s and the 1930s, when the cemetery appears to have fallen out of use.

That first building on the site is now nearing completion, but the developers

pledged to leave the remaining portions of the cemetery clear of construction. To do so, they redesigned the project to move a planned parking garage and second residential building off the burial ground. The developers will pay for the memorial and its maintenance.

Approval of the redesign has been put on a fast track because the developers need to break ground on their second phase by early next year or risk losing federal financing. The planning board's recommendation means the new plans will go to the city commission for final approval. Sponsors expect no issues there.

The city's Historic and Environmental Preservation Board also supported the revised blueprint and memorial park plans.

“We're all very confident this is going to happen,” said Alfred Sanchez, CEO of the YMCA of Greater Miami, which owns the land.

VICTORY DESIGNATION

The historic designation represented a big victory for community leaders. Cemeteries lacking architectural distinction or the grave of a distinguished figure don't usually qualify for designation. The Lemon City cemetery, with all traces of graves erased, has neither.

But Pinkney and other historians persuaded board members that the burial ground -- where at least one black Civil War veteran and one signatory of Miami's incorporation were buried -- is historically significant as one of the few remnants of segregation in Miami's early days.

Next up, Pinkney said: Community participation in designing a monument for the cemetery.

“We want young people involved,” she said.

“This is something they don't know anything about and it's up to them to keep these memories alive.”