



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jose M. Serrano

Senators Serrano and Perkins Hold Public Hearing to Discuss Protections for Historic Harlem African Burial Ground

JOSÉ M. SERRANO March 19, 2010



Senators José M. Serrano (D-Manhattan/Bronx) and Bill Perkins (D-Harlem) today held a public hearing to examine the impact pending public construction projects will have on what was once a colonial-era burial ground for African slaves and free blacks.

The burial ground was located where the MTA's 126th Street Bus Depot in East Harlem now stands, and occupied a quarter acre lot on the original Elmendorf Dutch Reformed Church grounds, on First Avenue between 126th and 127th Streets. Many community leaders fear the

historic burial ground might be lost or defiled due to ongoing work expanding the Willis Avenue bridge and a plan, to begin in 2015, to entirely rebuild the bus facility.

This is the second time in New York City that an African Burial Ground has been discovered during construction. In 1991, while excavating the foundation for the Ted Weiss Federal Building at 290 Broadway, workers discovered the remains of 400 slaves and free Africans in what was once an African Burial Ground. Finally in 2005, it was memorialized as the African Burial Ground National Monument.

"We are doing everything we can to ensure that what occurred at the Federal Building downtown- where people waited for years without getting any results from the government that was in place to serve them- does not occur at the African Burial Ground in Harlem," said Senator Serrano, who Chairs the Senate Committee on Cultural Affairs, Tourism, Parks and Recreation. "I strongly anticipate that as we continue to explore this land, remains and artifacts will be found. However, these were hardworking people who helped build New York City and this country. This is hallowed ground, and the cultural and historic significance must be honored and respected even prior to any findings.

"It is our intention, through this hearing, to have representatives of the MTA, DOT, and the State's Parks Commission respond to the community's justified concerns," said Senator Bill Perkins, Chair of the Senate Committee on Corporations, Authorities, Commissions.

"As co-chair of the African Burial Ground Task Force, I am proud to have the support of Senator José M. Serrano and Senator Bill Perkins in the struggle to protect the colonial African burial ground in East Harlem," said Councilmember Melissa Mark-Viverito. "Today the senators joined forces and held the first public hearing on this historical issue. As the work of the task force progresses, we are bolstered by the many caring individuals who have

joined our efforts to preserve, protect and commemorate this sacred and historical site.”

The legislators are members of the Elmendorf Reformed Church Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force— a group of concerned citizens united to help the Elmendorf Reformed Church (ERC) to restore and memorialize its historically and culturally significant land. Among the objectives of the task force, are reclaiming, preserving, and officially recognizing the ERC African Burial Ground, obtain Landmark status and its listing on the National Register of Historic Places, and commemorating and honoring the memory of those who helped build New Harlem.

“We have had a lot of difficulty getting the relevant agencies to take our concerns seriously. Our letters have gone unanswered, and our effort to engage in a productive dialogue has been mostly ignored,” said Reverend Patricia A. Singletary, pastor of Elmendorf Reformed Church, and Co-Chair of the African Burial Ground Task Force.

The elected officials heard testimony from concerned citizens, and representatives from the New York City Department of Transportation, the MTA, and the New York State Historic Preservation Office.