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OFFICIALS BUY PORTION OF CITY PARK OWNED BY WOMAN

North Miami Beach city officials had to pay \$57,000 for a portion of a park they thought they owned.

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Some of the land the Lusenda Neal Park sat on for years didn't belong to North Miami Beach until recently. Venus Sharon Roberts-Simms owned and was paying taxes on about 5,000 square feet of the park. Last year, she sent a letter to the city claiming it.

“It has been in her family for a long time. They started using her property as a park,” said her attorney Mark Tobin from law firm Brigham Moore. “The state constitution states anytime a government takes property, they are required to pay full compensation.”

North Miami Beach city officials had to pay \$57,000 for the land they thought they owned.

“We found it surprising,” said deputy City Manager Keven Klopp, “but we soon verified it was true.”

The park - located at Northeast 15th Avenue and 152nd Terrace - is not fenced in, and has no visible boundaries, said Klopp.

“The line between what the city owned and what was privately owned was invisible,” he said. “It was only on paper.”

The officials checked plot maps, property

and tax records, confirming Roberts-Simms owned part of the park.

The city immediately entered in negotiations to buy the property. If it had not, Roberts-Simms would have had the option to sell the land or build on it, said Klopp.

Lusenda Neal Park has served as a get-away for residents in the Washington Park area for more than 15 years. With its open green space, interrupted only by a few trees, it provides a perfect place for a summer picnic.

“It is an enjoying-the-outdoor kind of park,” said Park and Recreation director Harriet Orr. “It is a respite from the urban area.”

The city has maintained the property since the establishment of the park.

“It looks just like the park,” said Klopp referring to the parcel. “People assumed that was part of the park.”

After more than a year of negotiations, in July the city took over official ownership of all of Lusenda Neal Park.

“The city of North Miami Beach worked out a fair resolution,” said Tobin. The city should be commended for treating the Simms family fairly.”

The city says it was well worth it.

“Now we officially own it,” said Klopp. “We preserved our park.”