

Pastors sue state over corrupt cemetery bid

By Eric T. Campbell

Special to Sentinel-Voice

DETROIT (NNPA)- The National Foundation of St. Augustine Churches, a Detroit-based group of area pastors, say they are up against a corrupt bidding process in their quest to own and operate 28 Michigan cemeteries.

It's been more than a year since state authorities seized the 28 cemetery properties from Clayton R. Smart.

An oil speculator from Oklahoma, Smart bought the privately owned cemeteries in 2004 using dubious financing practices and proceeded to liquidate \$70 million of the trust assets to fund other ventures including \$22 million that was kicked back to the previous owner, lawyer Craig Bush of Farmington Hills.

State investigators and the Attorney General's Office are trying to locate that

money. Bush's assets have been frozen and Smart is due to face felony counts filed against him by Attorney General Mike Cox after his trial on similar charges in Tennessee is completed.

In the meantime, the state let bids to find a buyer for the cemeteries, but the winning offer looks more and more like a sweet financial arrangement between state conservators and a New Jersey-based cemetery operator, David J. Shipper.

If Ingham County Judge James Giddings approves, Shipper will be allowed to use the long abused cemetery trust fund as security for financing—a courtesy that was extended only to Shipper.

The St. Augustine group was denied such consideration. They've partnered with a former owner of four of the seized cemeteries and have been approved for loans by

the Raymond James and Independence banks for the cemetery purchase.

"We went through the entire bid process, we had the highest bid and the best package," said Pastor Walter Cheeks of the New St. Peters Missionary Baptist Church, an integral part of the St. Augustine group. St. Augustine's bid was \$34 million compared to Shipper's \$32 million bid, which was allowed at a very late stage in the bid proceedings.

Yet, Farmington Hills at-

torney Mark Zausmer, appointed by Attorney General Mike Cox to oversee the sale of the cemeteries and the trust recovery, has refused to meet with St. Augustine sponsors.

On Zausmer's recommendation to the Ingham County Courts, the Shipper group, which has now created a subsidiary corporation called the Detroit Memorial Group, along with primary investors Westminister Capital Inc., will be able to invest \$32 million for the cemeteries and be

allowed to use trust funds yet to be recovered to reimburse itself and recoup all of the equity investment.

Of that \$32 million, \$20.8 million earmarked for the merchandise trust fund, \$1.1 million for a separate prepaid cemetery sales trust and the remaining \$10 million for initial operating expenses. The total amount expected to be recovered in litigation against former owners will reach approximately \$67 million.

According to attorney

Cathy Henry, the \$22 million seized from Craig Bush and held in an escrow account will immediately be available to the Shipper Group upon closing the deal. The financing recommendation made by Zausmer and state regulators means the Shipper group and its lenders are taking virtually no risk in the investment and will profit as soon as the deal is closed — even before any sale of the cemeteries is made.

Eric T. Campbell writes for the Michigan Citizen.

Industry insiders happy strike over

By Olu Alemoru

Special to Sentinel-Voice

LOS ANGELES (NNPA) - Amid much jubilation, striking movie and television writers have unanimously voted to go back to work, ending a three month stoppage that has devastated the local entertainment industry.

An overwhelming majority of the Writer's Guild of America's 10,500 members ratified Feb. 12 a new three-year agreement with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers.

The action followed a unanimous decision by the board and negotiating committee of the Guild to recommend a tentative contract reached with the producers.

News of the deal comes in the nick of time for the Feb. 24 Academy Awards Show, which had been under threat of a red carpet boycott. It also means the networks will be able to start developing new shows for next season.

As for current shows, there's good news for fans of the CW's "Everybody Hates Chris" and "The Game." According to CW media spokesman Paul McGuire a full 22 episode season has been ordered for "Chris" and there would be no viewer interruption.

McGuire said the network was hoping to have about eight or nine fresh episodes of "The Game" ready for a return in March. However,

"Girlfriends," created by Mara Brock Akil, is in its eighth and final season and no additional episodes have been planned.

Added McGuire: "As a result of the strike we are working with the producers to come up with some sort of special that would conclude the series."

The new agreement doubles the rate that writers are paid for movie and TV shows sold online, establishes the union's jurisdiction over programming created for the Internet and for the first time provides payment for entertainment that is streamed on websites.

"This is the best deal the Guild has bargained for in 30 years," said Patrick M. Verrone, president of the West Coast Guild, at a news conference announcing the new contract.

"It's not all we hoped for, and it's not all we deserve, but... this deal assures for us and for future generations a share in the future."

With industry sources putting the cost of the strike at more than \$1 billion, news of the resolution came as sheer relief.

Veteran TV comedy writer and playwright Michael Ajakwe, whose credits include "Martin," "The Parkers," "Soul Food" and "Eve," welcomed the deal and hailed his fellow

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