

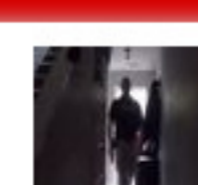
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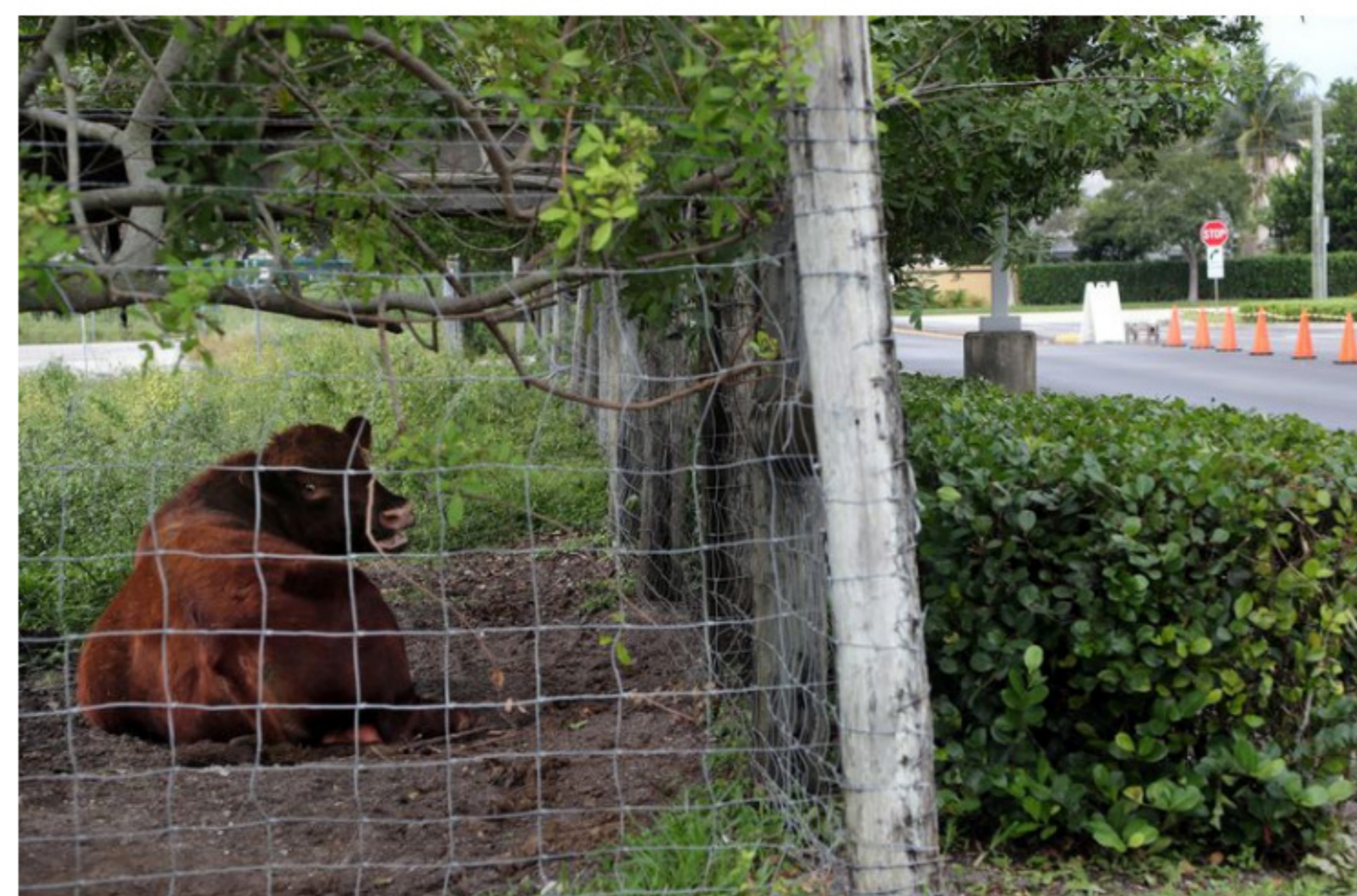


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BROWARD COUNTY NEWS LOCAL NEWS

# How a solitary cow grazing on a million-dollar property created a beef between a church and the county

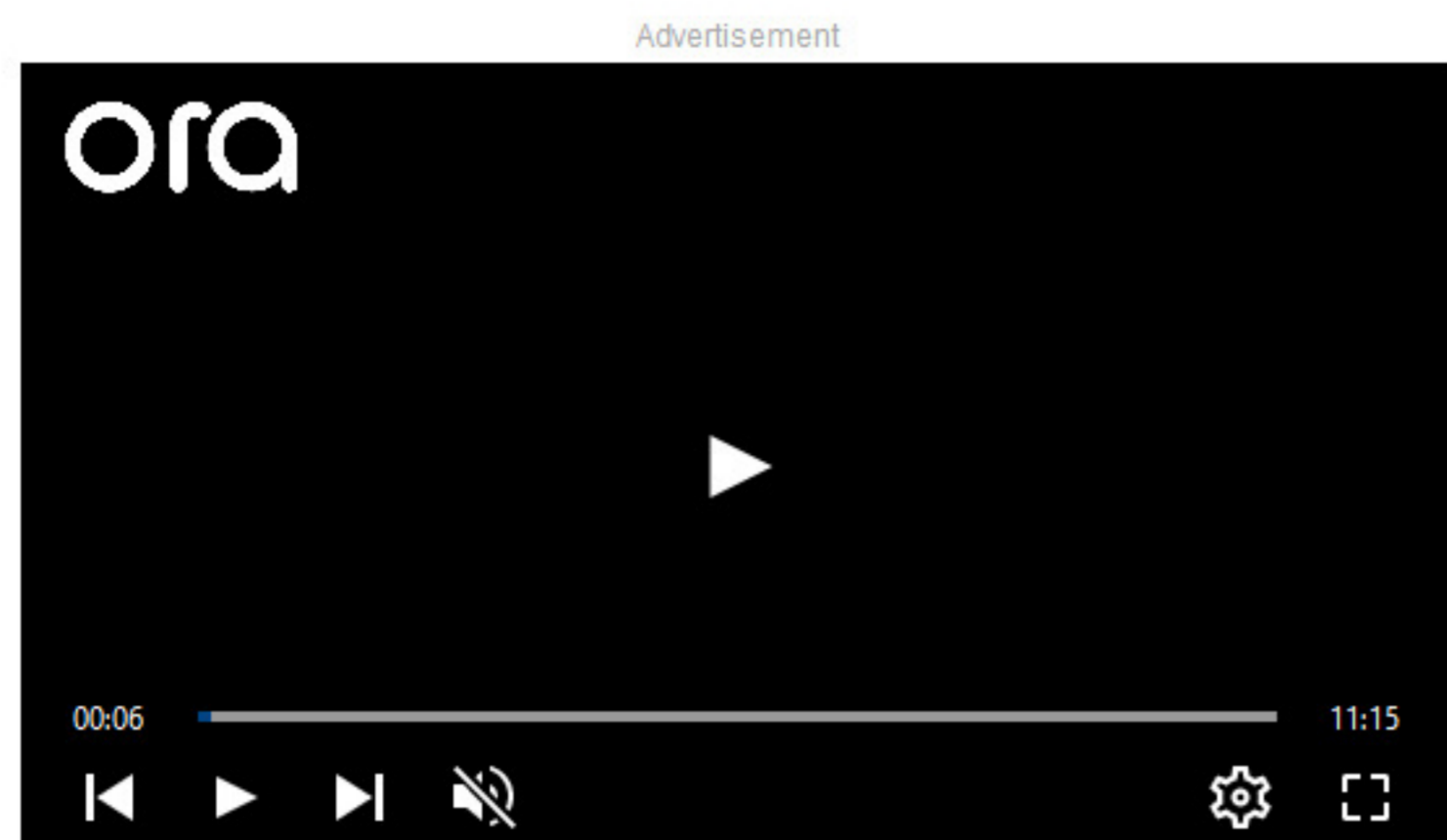
By CHRIS PERKINS  
SOUTH FLORIDA SUN SENTINEL | DEC 05, 2020 AT 2:12 PM



A solitary cow known as Bambi rests in a field next to the First Baptist Church of Southwest Broward in Cooper City on Friday, Dec. 4. (Amy Beth Bennett / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

At first glance, the lone cow grazing on a nearly two-acre chunk of fenced land next to a church in Broward County seems innocuous enough.

But behind those big, brown eyes is a sour controversy.



Bambi is something of a sacred cow. She sparked a legal dispute that still rankles county officials. An animal rights group accused the church of cruel treatment. And in the end, Bambi may be the most valuable bovine around.

The land on which Bambi roams, once assessed at \$1.9 million, is owned by the First Baptist Church of Southwest Broward. With the cow on site, the property is taxed on a value of just \$131,760 — saving the church a whole lot of moolah.

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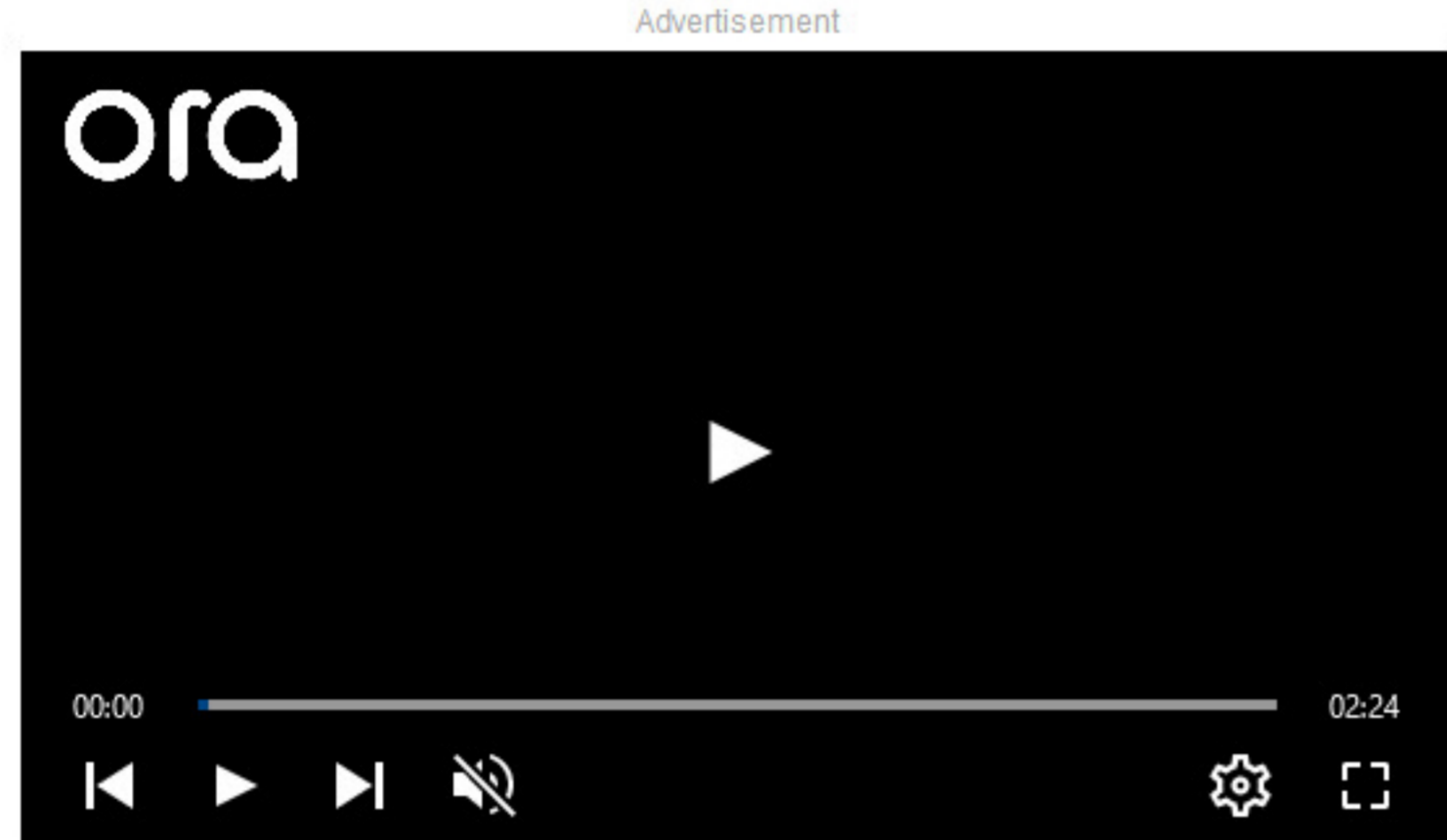
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At issue is the church's claim that Bambi's presence makes the property a working cattle operation which, therefore, can be classified as agricultural land.



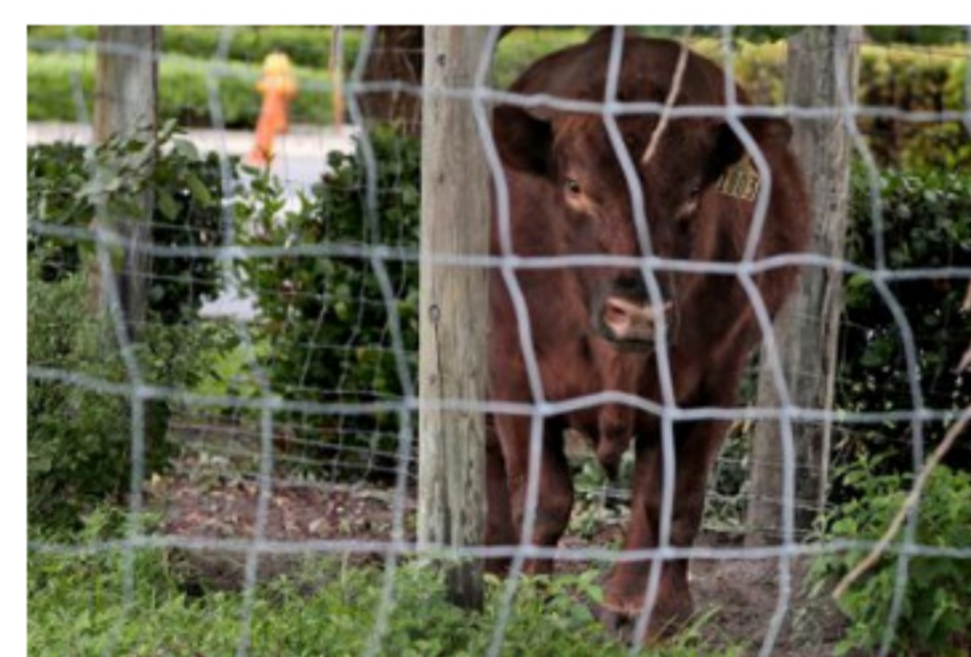
Although the lot on which the physical church sits is exempt from taxes, the adjacent property where Bambi lives doesn't get the same exemption. Designating the property as a for-profit agricultural operation substantially reduces the assessed value of the property for tax purposes by more than 93%.

"The purpose of the cattle operations there is to make a profit, as it has been since the 1970s," Pastor Tom Odom testified last year at a hearing over the issue, according to county records. "Carrying on the history is a part of it. Supplying grass-fed, naturally raised cattle is valuable for the community. The church invests in the property."

The county says the assertion that the property qualifies as a cattle operation is hogwash.

In 2019, the Broward County property appraiser denied the church's agricultural classification on the property.

The church appealed the decision, claiming that the site has been used for agricultural purposes for more than 100 years and once was the site of a dairy farm.



Bambi grazes alone on the two-acre lot next to the First Baptist Church of Southwest Broward on Friday. (Amy Beth Bennett / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

The appeal went before a special magistrate appointed by the county's Value Adjustment Board, which settles disputes between taxpayers and the property appraiser.

The church prevailed. The magistrate, after seeing business receipts and other documents, determined the church was indeed running a bona fide agricultural business and granted the classification in March.

To this day, the county stands by its original decision.

"My belief is our office got it right, and I definitely stand by my office's determination," said Broward County Property Appraiser Marty Kiar. "But at the end of the day the Value Adjustment Board is set up to settle disputes between the property owner and the property appraiser, and we didn't prevail so it has to be granted."

Church officials did not respond to requests for comment. But their attorney, Ryan Abrams, said the agricultural classification isn't an attempt to take advantage of a tax loophole. In fact, Abrams said, the church is running a cattle operation.

"The issue is whether the property was being used for a bona fide commercial agricultural use," Abrams said. "These cows were being kept on this land not as pets, but ultimately to be sold either for milk or for meat. And that's basically why they were there."

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In fact, another nearby property owned by the church has several cows, including one bull. The agricultural classification of that property was not disputed by the county.

Designating a property as agricultural is fairly common. In the 2020 tax year, there were 1,254 properties in Broward County with that classification. In Palm Beach County, at least three religious groups have properties classified as agricultural but it is unknown how many Broward County has.

There's at least one, for sure — it's where Bambi can be seen roaming around her two-acre empire, mostly alone. And her solitary existence has raised an entirely different concern from an animal-rights group.

The Animal Rights Foundation of Florida testified at the special magistrate's hearing that keeping Bambi alone on the property was a form of cruelty.

Cows, the group said, are herd animals, not loners. According to the World Animal Foundation, cows "are social animals and form strong bonds with their families and friends that can last their entire lives."

Bambi is frequently seen alone on the church's property.

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Even if more cows were present on the property, its size would lead to overgrazing and a "smelly" neighborhood, the Animal Rights Foundation argued in its testimony.

The group says it complained to church officials, but never received a reply. And, like the county, they don't buy the church's claim that Bambi's land can be considered a working farm.

"We don't think the church is fooling anybody," said Nick Atwood, campaigns coordinator for the Animal Rights Foundation of Florida. "It's pretty obvious the cows are not a working, profitable cattle ranch. They're obviously there for tax benefits."

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Ultimately, the magistrate didn't agree that Bambi's solitude was cruel. And it bought the church's claim that Bambi was alone because she was the smallest cow they owned and needed to be kept apart from those on the church's other property to protect her from bullying — and from an aggressive bull.

Even as the Animal Rights Foundation continues to push for changes to Bambi's situation, the county appears to be done with the matter.

"I think it's pretty clear that although we disagree with it, we respect the process and the special magistrate's outcome" said Rick Smith, associate general counsel for the property appraiser's office.

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He said the property's agricultural classification needs to be renewed each year but the county must grant it unless there's been a substantial change to the land's use.

As for Bambi's situation, Abrams didn't know if the church would be making any changes. After all, he said, the church is in compliance on both the land use and the ethical treatment of the cows.

"The animal rights folks, I think, were complaining a lot, and they still do complain a lot is my understanding," Abrams said. "They think cows are being abused, and frankly there is no evidence of that."

Topics: feature, broward, animals, government



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