



## **COUNCIL COMMITTEE REPORT**

### **OPEN SPACE, ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY COMMITTEE**

**Date:** June 24, 2015

**Agenda Item #:** 6

**Agenda Item:** Consider and develop a recommendation on the Historic Cemetery Master Plan.

**Vote** A recommendation to approve the item subject to the addition of the recommendations of the boards and commissions was passed on CM Zimmerman's motion and on CM Garza's second. Vote 3-0-0-1. MPT Tovo was off the dais.

**Sponsors/Department:** Parks and Recreation Department

#### **Summary of Discussion**

Kim McKnight, Project Coordinator with the Parks and Recreation Department (PAR), provided an overview on the City's Historic Cemeteries Master Plan. The City of Austin's PAR staff manages the following five historic cemeteries that comprise more than 60,000 burials:

1. Oakwood Cemetery, 1601 Navasota Street.
2. Oakwood Cemetery Annex, 1601 Comal Street
3. Plummers Cemetery, 1150 Springdale Road
4. Evergreen Cemetery, 3304 E. 12<sup>th</sup> Street
5. Austin Memorial Park Cemetery, 2800 Hancock Drive

Cities throughout the United States are struggling with issues surrounding historic cemeteries, particularly historic urban cemeteries. The American population is increasingly mobile and less likely to remain root near the cemeteries where their relatives are buried. As a result, many of the nation's oldest cemeteries, both public and privately owned are largely abandoned by the communities they once served. In addition, Local governments faced with limited budgets find it difficult to prioritize cemetery upkeep when the needs of living residents are pressing and immediate. Faced with such challenges, those who manage and advocate for historic cemeteries are finding ways to reimagine the cemetery's role in the community and finding ways to creatively engage the citizens.

The City of Austin's Historic Cemetery Master Plan provides a long term framework for the five cemeteries listed above, which are all managed by the City. CM Pool noted that this plan represents the culmination of years of advocacy, community engagement, professional evaluation, and planning. McKnight explained that although other cities have undertaken similar

projects for individual cemeteries, this project may be one of the most sweeping cemetery master plans developed in the United States as it encompasses five separate and distinct different historic cemeteries established over the course of nearly a century.

- *Process to Date*

The Parks and Recreation Department took a great deal of effort to develop the scope of work with Parks Board Chair Jane Rivera who led the cause. PARD conducted many meetings to identify issues of cemeteries: four were conducted in the spring of 2012, followed by six meetings in the summer of 2013 to develop the scope of work with the community. After obtaining the contract with AmaTerra Environmental, they conducted five meetings with the community.

The draft Historic Cemetery Master Plan was posted to the City's website for public review and comment for seven weeks from January-March of 2015. PARD received hundreds of comments and then posted a revised draft in April of 2015, as a result of the public input received. PARD expects to post another revision prior to going to City Council in September of 2015.

- *Community Engagement*

PARD conducted twenty-five stakeholder interviews and distributed newsletters which were placed in senior centers, libraries, and recreational centers. In addition, signage was placed in the City's cemeteries and media advisories.

The outreach was targeted to Community Registry, the Austin Neighborhood Council, Save Austin's Cemeteries, Preservation Austin, and African-American Cultural Heritage District and cemetery organizations.

- *Historic Cemeteries Master Plan*

The plan is divided into three sections:

- Part I: Introduction/Natural, Historical, and Cultural Context
- Part II: Cemetery Management Guidelines
- Part III: Policy and Funding Recommendations

There is a section on General Management Guidelines with extensive information about tree care and management, site furnishings, and fencing etc. These guidelines apply to all of the City's cemeteries. Furthermore, the recommendations will be incorporated into PARD's maintenance standards.

- *Tree Survey*

Through PARD's partnership with the City's Park Forestry staff and the Urban Forest Replenishment fund of the Development Services Department, a \$65,000 tree survey and conditions assessment was funded which served as the baseline for PARD's Historic Cemetery Master Plan and general recommendations. More than 4,000 trees were surveyed and unfortunately 900 dead trees, snags, and stumps were identified.

- *Oakwood Cemetery (1839) and Oakwood Cemetery Annex (1914)*

Oakwood Cemetery and Oakwood Cemetery Annex are the oldest and they represent the earliest burials in Austin. The recommendations for improvements at these cemeteries have to do with appearance such as sidewalks, fences, roads, and rehabilitation of the historic chapel building. In addition, better signage, kiosks with information about the people buried there will make visiting them a better experience. The City is not actively selling plots in this cemetery because there is no space available.

- *Plummers Cemetery (1898)*

Plummers Cemetery is a small family cemetery of about eight acres that backs up to the Given's Recreational Center. It started in 1898 with private burials. In addition, it is traditionally an African American cemetery. The City purchased the cemetery with the acquisition of the Given's Recreation Center and has been managing it. The City is not actively selling plots in this cemetery because there is no space available.

- *Evergreen Cemetery (1926)*

Evergreen Cemetery dates back to 1926 and can be best described as a place representing the institutional segregation of the city. People were separated and segregated in life, but they were also segregated in death. As a result of the research conducted by the City in partnership with the community, the City has learned that some of the most significant civil rights leaders of the city are buried here. The recommendations for the cemetery include fencing, accessible restroom that currently does not exist, improvements to roads, and tree plantings. The City is actively selling plots in this cemetery.

- *Austin Memorial Park Cemetery (1927)*

Austin Memorial Park Cemetery is probably the cemetery most known to citizens as it can be seen when driving near Mopac and 2222. This was a private cemetery that started in 1927 until it was purchased by the City in 1941. Some of the improvement recommendations proposed by PARD for this cemetery include: moving the maintenance yard to the far north of the cemetery so it is not at the entrance where visitors come in; re-purpose a historic outbuilding to become accessible restrooms and a visitor facility; and construct a columbarium which is a decorative wall for cremated remains. Through community surveys and input from the consultant team studying national trends, the City learned that cremation is something that the community is interested in as this provides burial options as well as potential revenue generation for the cemetery. The City is actively selling plots in this cemetery.

- *Policy and Funding Recommendations*

McKnight primarily focused and discussed programming strongly supported by PARD and neighborhoods surrounding the historic cemeteries that are no longer active. Through this process, PARD has learned that across the country communities are trying to manage their less active cemeteries like Oakwood Cemetery, Oakwood Cemetery Annex, and Plummers

Cemetery. The City can continue to have the occasional family member drive through or the City can come up with ways to educate the citizen's about the history of the city, history of architecture through funerary objects, for example. There are many opportunities and there are many examples across the country of cemeteries doing this. This recommendation has caused some citizen's to be a little concerned and McKnight clarified that PARD is not recommending programming of any kind in the cemeteries that have active burials on a daily basis such as Evergreen and Memorial Park Cemeteries. PARD has programming happening through their partnership with Save Austin Cemeteries.

- *Recommendations from Boards and Commissions*

The Historic Landmark Commission (HLC) endorsed the proposed Master Plan in accordance with staff recommendation, which is to request that consideration be given towards the designation of Evergreen Cemetery, Plummers Cemetery, and Austin Memorial Park Cemetery as potential historic landmarks. These cemeteries are certainly eligible for this designation, unlike Oakwood and Oakwood Annex Cemeteries, PARD has not received assistance from the Friends Group to help with a historic designation. Additionally, HLC asked PARD to consider including a map, which was referenced in the Citizen Communications portion of the June 24, 2015 committee meeting. PARD accepts the HLC recommendations relating to historic designation and will document the recommendation and the map in Appendix S, which will appear in the revised Historic Cemeteries Master Plan.

The Urban Forestry Board's (UFB) recommendations had to do with irrigation and elevating the irrigation proposal for all cemeteries in Priority 1, and include specific language related to application of compost, mulch and supplemental watering of trees during periods of insufficient rainfall. Furthermore, UFB elevated tree planting, and making some small wording changes. PARD accepts the UFB's recommendations and will incorporate the recommendations into the final revision of the Historic Cemeteries Master Plan.

The Environmental Board's (EB) recommendations included a recommendation for a detailed study to determine feasibility and implementation strategies to improve irrigation practices and resources in cemeteries with a primary emphasis on tree irrigation during drought. Also, the board asked that the parking lot in the Austin Memorial Park be reduced from 30 spaces to 10. In addition, the Board asked that PARD prioritize the impacts to existing trees in constructing the new parking lot. PARD accepts the EB's recommendations and will incorporate the recommendations into the final revision of the Historic Cemeteries Master Plan.

The Planning Commission's (PC) recommendations included that PARD support all the recommendations for the Boards and Commissions. In addition, the PC asked that PARD consider removal of the north access gate at the Austin Memorial Cemetery or list the specific uses that would be allowed. The PC also asked that PARD consider hiring an outside multi-disciplinary consulting team to advise on cemetery irrigation. PARD accepts the PC's recommendations and will incorporate the recommendations into the final revision of the Historic Cemeteries Master Plan.

CM Pool wanted to confirm that the irrigation is going to be addressed more specifically as far as the cost and that there was a recommendation that the Environmental Commission and the Urban Forestry Board be included in those conversations. McKnight responded explaining that PARD

would be happy to return and generally PARD happy to explore this aspect of cemetery management more. CM Pool recommended that PARD include a realistic and attainable tree care plan that would comply with the Urban Forestry Board relating to composting, mulching, and irrigation during periods of insufficient rainfall.

In addition, CM Pool explained that there is 34-inch Texas Ash at the entrance of Austin Memorial Park Cemetery and wanted to know if it would be possible for the tree to be preserved and to possibly move the flag poles. Environmental Board Chair Mary Gay Maxwell asked the question if whether the tree was a Heritage Tree, and further added that any Heritage Trees have to go through Environmental Commission for consideration. PARD confirmed that it is a Heritage Tree and confirmed that before taking any tree down, PARD would consult with Urban Forestry Board and Environmental Commission, further explaining that as PARD moves through design development, which may take several years due to funding availability, PARD would have to go through the design development and site development process and the standard procedures that happen with site plans.

### **Public Comments**

- Michael Fossum spoke against.
- David King donated his time to Michael Fossum.
- Sharon Blythe spoke against.
- David Llanes donated his time to Sharon Blythe.
- Walter Ivie donated his time to Sharon Blythe.
- Zoila Vega spoke against.
- David Orshalick spoke against.
- Dale Flatt spoke in favor.
- Kata Carbone spoke in favor with a recommendation.

### **Direction**

Allow staff to address and revise the Historic Cemetery Master Plan to include all the recommendations from the Boards and Commissions. The Council will have an opportunity to review the final plan before presented to City Council in September of 2015.

### **Recommendation**

A recommendation to approve the item subject to the addition of the recommendations of the boards and commissions was passed on CM Zimmerman's motion and on CM Garza's second. Vote 3-0-0-1. MPT Tovo was off the dais.