

## Cemeteries Preservation Commission Meeting Meeting Summary

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**What:** Meeting of the Cemeteries Commission at Jacksonville City Hall (Committee Room B).

**In attendance:** Commission members: Jerry Spinks, Chair. Brenda Ezell, Jon Ferguson, Marion Graham, Emily Lisska, Hazel Mack, Joel McEachin, Richard Mueller, Louise Warren. Citizens: George Banks, Rosabelle Judge, Ken Loving, Larry Rosenblatt, Linda Rosenblatt, Ann Staley, Bill Yarbrough. JCCI Staff: Steve Rankin.

**Meeting Time:** 6:30 – 7:45 p.m.

**Discussion:** Chairman Spinks called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m. He explained that the primary purpose of the meeting was for the Commission to reach consensus on topics and potential resource speakers for the three weekly meetings scheduled during September (12, 19, 26) at JCCI Headquarters, 2434 Atlantic Blvd. Each meeting will be held from 8:15 – 9:45 a.m.

Mr. Spinks briefly reviewed a handout highlighting the Commission's charge as identified by the City Council and former Councilwoman Gwen Yates, co-sponsor of Resolution 2004-1349A. The Commission agreed that its goal is to identify issues related to abandoned and neglected cemeteries in Jacksonville, and to develop a plan for addressing these issues for presentation to the City Council at the end of 2007.

The Commission then reviewed materials provided suggesting potential topics for the fact-finding sessions, as well as a list of possible resource speakers. It was agreed that the broad topics to be covered should include a review of the pertinent facts; the law; resources; and best practices from other communities. Specific topics within these subject areas included identification of applicable laws and regulations; determining the rights and responsibilities of landowners; identification of dos and don'ts of cemetery maintenance; reconstruction and maintenance of headstones and monuments; volunteer "adopt-a-cemetery" groups; etc.

After a thorough discussion of the schedule of upcoming Commission meetings and potential topics for each, the Commission confirmed agendas and speakers for the following meetings:

- September 12:
  - Brief review of JCCI process;
  - How the law impacts preservation of cemeteries (Brenda Ezell);
  - Review of report of Florida State Task Force on Abandoned and Neglected Cemeteries (Richard Mueller).
- September 19:
  - Identification and mapping of cemeteries in Duval County (Joel McEachin; Brent Handley, Environmental Services Inc.)
- September 26
  - Demonstration of "how to": Issues dealing with restoration, maintenance, security (Gravelly Hill citizen group; Johnny Lemon).
- October 10
  - Best practices from other communities (Pensacola-Margo Stringfield; New Orleans-Shannon Palmer; Charlotte-Louise Warren).



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The Commission agreed that the final two weekly meetings (October 31, November 7) will be utilized for developing the final action plan, and that October 24 will temporarily be left open until it can be determined whether a third week for conclusions and recommendations is required. The agenda for the October 3 and October 17 meetings will be determined on September 12, and Commission members were encouraged to carefully consider how best to use these two remaining dates to appropriately cover all of the most critical issues. Mr. McEachin strongly recommended contacting Sharon Thompson, one of Florida's leading experts on cemetery issues, to speak on one of the remaining open dates. He suggested her level of expertise would be valuable on a variety of issues the Commission is exploring.

In addition, the Commission tentatively scheduled two Saturday off-site field trips on October 6 and October 20. The first, for which a starting time will be determined later, will include a first-hand look at several cemeteries in the area near Moncrief Road and Edgewood Avenue on the city's Northside. Designed to raise public awareness of the issues facing neglected cemeteries, this event will be open to the public and media. Cemeteries that may be included in this tour are Greenwood, Hillside, Memorial, New Mt. Herman, Mt. Pleasant, and Sunset Memorial Park. The second field trip on October 20, to be held at Gravely Hill Cemetery (7242 Normandy Blvd.), will include an on-site demonstration of cleaning and restoration of grave sites. "Friends of Gravely Hill", a 90-member volunteer group dedicated to reviving this historic graveyard, will host the Commission, interested public and media beginning at 9 a.m.

The Commission then opened the floor to public comments, including the following:

- What criteria does the City of Jacksonville use to determine which of the cemeteries included in the register it maintains?
- The inventory of cemeteries included in the Duval County Register of Resting Places completed in 2000 has very sketchy information regarding acreage and number of graves. In most cases, the number of graves listed is zero. Is it possible to get this information updated so it is reasonably accurate?
- It was noted by an experienced volunteer associated with the Friends of Gravely Hill that caution is essential when visiting neglected and overgrown cemeteries. For example, snakes are frequently found in the underbrush, and head stones that have slipped over the years can easily be tripped over.
- A professional genealogist suggested gaining clarification of the laws related with publishing rights in cemeteries. She noted that photographing and publishing gravesites is frequently not permitted by cemetery owners, and she expressed interest in knowing whether they are within their rights to disallow such activity.

The meeting adjourned at 7:45 p.m.