

Cemeteries Commission Meeting Summary

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What: Fact-finding meeting of the Abandoned and Neglected Cemeteries Commission.

In attendance: Commission members: Jerry Spinks, Chair. Brenda Ezell, Jon Ferguson, Emily Lisska, Hazel Mack, Joel McEachin, Richard Mueller, Louise Warren. Concerned Citizens: Christine Farley, Harold Felder, Arthur Hall, Daryl Joseph, Johnson Pace, Jr., John Pittman, Larry Rosenblatt, Linda Rosenblatt, Ann Staley, Thomas Waters. JCCI Staff: Skip Cramer, Ben Warner, Steve Rankin.

Meeting Time: 8:15 – 9:45 a.m.

Discussion: Mr. Spinks welcomed everyone and explained that the focus of this meeting of the Cemeteries Commission was to learn how volunteer groups can effectively address issues dealing with the restoration and maintenance of cemeteries. He noted that “The Friends of Gravely Hill”, an existing group in Jacksonville, provides an excellent model for other volunteer organizations to emulate and has become an efficient caregiver to the Gravely Hill Cemetery.

Mr. Rankin reviewed the upcoming schedule of Commission events, noting that the next two regular Commission meetings will be devoted to case studies of effective practices in New Orleans, Charlotte, and Pensacola. He also said that off-site tours had been scheduled for Saturday, October 6 (walking tour of several cemeteries on the Northside – meet at 9:30 a.m. at the corner of Moncrief Road and Edgewood Avenue); and for Saturday, October 27 (demonstration of maintenance and preservation techniques at Gravely Hill Cemetery – 9:00 a.m. at 7242 Normandy Blvd. inside Riverside Memorial Park).

Resource Speakers:

Shannon Eller (Office of the General Counsel, City of Jacksonville):

- Ms. Eller discussed a Jacksonville City Ordinance passed in 2002 permitting the removal of protected trees in cemeteries if the roots are disturbing gravesites. Ordinance 2001-1327-E reads in part as follows: The following protected trees are exempted from the provisions of Subpart A (which otherwise prohibits the removal of trees in cemeteries): “Any tree located on an individual cemetery plot and removed at the request and with the consent of an individual cemetery plot owner; provided, however that this exemption shall not apply to the expansion of existing cemeteries.”
- Prior to this Ordinance, it was both difficult and prohibitively costly to gain the right to remove trees under such circumstances. Since the Ordinance, an applicant for the exemption merely obtains a permit from the City for a fee of \$25 and is required to provide supporting evidence that he is entitled to the exemption.
- Ms. Eller emphasized that the Tree Ordinance may be regarded as an example of the City recognizing the need to make it easier for interested parties to maintain cemeteries, and it might provide a model for other potential Ordinance Code modifications that would meet the same objectives. She suggested that if one of the goals of the Cemeteries Commission is to develop ways to make maintenance of cemeteries easier to accomplish, they may wish to consider recommending similar changes in other portions of the Code.

- Jon Ferguson noted that for many of the cemeteries in the area, an owner cannot be identified or located, making application of the Tree Ordinance exemption problematic in such cases. It was noted that if a goal is to make cemetery maintenance easier and accessible to more people, it may be worth proposing modifications to the language in the Ordinance Code relating to ownership of cemeteries and/or plot owners.

Linda Rosenblatt (Representing “Friends of Gravely Hill”):

- “Friends of Gravely Hill”, now a volunteer group of approximately 90 members, evolved from a cemetery workshop held at Gravely Hill Cemetery in September, 2005. Gravely Hill is one of several cemeteries for which the City’s Parks and Recreation Department is responsible for maintenance, but because the facility was in poor condition at the time of the workshop, several of the attendees offered their assistance in cleaning up the cemetery.
- In seeking City permission to work inside the Cemetery, the group was told that permission could be granted if they formed a “Friends of the Park” organization. Their application for this status was approved in January, 2006. “Friends” is structured as a corporation.
- The initial small group added volunteers to its ranks by contacting such organizations as United Daughters of the Confederacy, Sons of Confederate Veterans, Southern Genealogist Exchange Society, and Museum of Southern History. Other grass-roots recruiting efforts were utilized, including word-of-mouth, the internet, and placement of waterproof notes on grave sites asking visiting family members to join.
- Friends of Gravely Hill has a contractual relationship with the City of Jacksonville which spells out its rights and obligations.
- Limited funding is necessary to provide for transportation, cleaning materials, etc., and is collected through donations.
- The group meets at the cemetery twice a month for cleanup and maintenance activities and has several committees that coordinate various activities (landscape maintenance, cleaning of graves, gravestone repair, etc.). New volunteers are provided instruction on how to perform their tasks, including the dos and don’ts of grave marker care.
- There are at least two well-organized and reputable national cemetery preservation organizations (Chicora, Association of Gravestone Studies) that are available to provide assistance, including on-site training for a fee.
- “Friends of Gravely Hill” represents the *model* volunteer organization in Jacksonville for cemetery preservation and maintenance. Their suggestions to other fledgling volunteer groups include:
 - Establish a small base group of interested and dedicated people with the same goals.
 - Seek the proper authorization to work inside the cemetery. If it is not managed by the City, approach family members if they can be located and ask permission to include their family plots within the scope of the project.
 - Research local and state cemetery ordinances and statutes to make sure the work being conducted is in compliance with the law.
 - Increase the volunteer member base by contacting such organizations as church groups, family members, Boy Scout troops, historical societies, genealogical societies, jaycees groups, student groups seeking community service credits, lodge members, local civic service groups, etc.
 - Document the work done inside the cemetery. Survey the graves in writing and photographically with before and after documentation.

What we learned today:

- Shannon Eller indicated that the City of Jacksonville would be open to suggested modifications to the Ordinance Code that would potentially make it less difficult for interested parties to perform work in local cemeteries. Citing the Tree Ordinance code modification of 2002, she said the Cemeteries Commission may wish to consider similar changes.
- “Friends of Gravely Hill” would be willing to serve as a mentoring organization for new cemetery volunteer groups to help them learn the processes involved.

- Daryl Joseph from the City's Parks & Recreation Department reported that the Cemetery Maintenance Trust Fund established in 1994 currently has a total of just over \$131,000 in its account (it is not permitted to fall below \$123,000). The Fund is used to provide ongoing maintenance at those cemeteries under city management. In regard to the cost of maintenance, Mr. Joseph noted that the city awarded a contract to an outside vendor for maintenance of city cemeteries for \$29.94 per acre, but the vendor was unwilling to do the work for that fee. When a second vendor requested \$50/acre, the city decided to do the work in-house instead.
- Highly efficient and effective maintenance and preservation of cemeteries can be provided by well-organized volunteer groups such as "Friends of Gravely Hill" at very little cost.
- Service organizations (Boy Scouts, church groups, student groups, civic groups, etc.) represent a plentiful source of potential volunteers for groups seeking to provide maintenance to neglected cemeteries.

Based on a suggestion during the public comment portion of the meeting, the Commission agreed to review the schedule of its upcoming meetings with the goal of making them as available to as many portions of the general public as possible. It was agreed that the October 3 Commission meeting will begin at 9:00 a.m. rather than 8:15, and the time and location of subsequent meetings will be reviewed as well. One suggestion under consideration was to hold one or more evening open forums at locations in other parts of town designed to supplement the Commission's fact-finding sessions with opportunities for additional public input.

The meeting adjourned at 9:45 a.m.