Austin Cemeteries Master Plan

Community Meeting #3 — Summary Report
Steph McDougal, McDoux Preservation LLC
August 27, 2014

The Austin Cemeteries Master Plan project (2014–2015) will produce a long-range planning document to help the City of Austin manage the preservation and future development of the five city-owned cemeteries: Austin Memorial Park Cemetery, Evergreen Cemetery, Oakwood Cemetery, Oakwood Cemetery Annex, and Plummers Cemetery.

The public engagement portion of the project includes five community meetings, to be held approximately every two months throughout the project period. At these meetings, members of the public will receive information about the project and will be encouraged to provide input and feedback on various aspects of the Master Plan.

The third community meeting was held on Saturday, August 23, 2014, from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Austin Public Library Ruiz Branch at 1600 Grove Blvd., in the Montopolis neighborhood. Approximately 30 people attended the meeting.

Project team members in attendance included:

- Kim McKnight, project coordinator, PARD Cultural Resources Specialist
- Laura Knott (John Milner Associates, Inc.)
- Mason Miller (AmaTerra Environmental, Inc.)
- Steph McDougal (McDoux Preservation LLC)

City staff members Kevin Johnson (Capital Improvements) and Jorge Morales (Watershed Protection) also were present.

The majority of the meeting consisted of a presentation of current conditions at each of the five historic municipal cemeteries by historical landscape architect Laura Knott. The meeting also included a review of project status, an opportunity for participants to ask questions about conditions in each cemetery, and a breakout session, where people were encouraged to share their opinions on potential programming ideas for the cemeteries.

Introduction and Project Status

Kim McKnight opened the meeting and reviewed the goals of the master plan; Steph McDougal then presented the evening's agenda. Mason Miller gave an overview of the project status to date, stating that the data collection and findings portion of the project, which had been scheduled for the summer, is now complete, and that the team is now moving on to analyzing the data and developing recommendations.

Current Conditions

Laura Knott summarized the conditions found in each cemetery through a series of slides showing representative photographs. She began with a statement about the general character of the cemetery, followed by comments about topics such as

Austin Memorial Park

The general character of Austin Memorial Park is defined by its elaborate entrance, groves of live oaks and other trees, graves organized in rows, and an expansive open, undeveloped area for new graves. Many ethnic groups are represented in this cemetery; it is unique among the five municipal cemeteries for its diversity. Separate plans for the rehabilitation of the buildings at Austin Memorial Park, funded by the Capital Improvement Fund, are in progress.

Issues at Austin Memorial Park include:

- *Incompatible views.* Signs, poles, and shrubs clutter the view across the cemetery; views to MoPac are unattractive and accompanied by road noise; and the perimeter chain link fence is incompatible with a historic cemetery.
- *Identity and wayfinding,* The main cemetery sign is located to the side of the front garden and blocks views to the building; historically, this sign was located over the entrance gate. No wayfinding information is available at decision points, and the section/block signs marking the different areas of the cemetery are located alongside those sections instead of at intersections. The section signs are also tall and clutter views into the cemetery.
- *Circulation.* The historic limestone curbing is only extant at the circle near the center of the cemetery. Generally, where curbs are present, these have been damaged by vehicular impacts and inappropriately repaired; where no curbs exist, vehicles have driven off the road at turns, resulting in a deteriorated edge along the roadway.
- *Accessibility.* The restroom (tower) building near the entrance is not ADA compliant, and Hancock Drive does not have sidewalk access west of the cemetery entrance.
- *Grave Conditions.* While much of the cemetery is in fairly good condition, compared to other city cemeteries, issues include minor vandalism, ponding of water around irrigation hose bibs, mower and trimmer damage, and a preponderance of private grave furnishings and other decorative items that, in some sections of the cemetery, make maintenance and mowing extremely difficult.

Citizen comments and questions included:

- Austin Memorial Park used to be a pasture.
- What about the trees and repairs/replacement of irrigation equipment? Kevin Johnson reported on the replacement of hose bibs in the four cemeteries that currently have irrigations systems (i.e., all but Plummers). Kim McKnight noted that this is not a full-scale program and is just to address immediate concerns.
- There is a loss of water pressure in Section 5B.
- Unique gravesite decorations are found in Section 6, especially, and are a reason why people chose to be buried there.

Evergreen Cemetery

The soil at Evergreen Cemetery is slightly more sandy than at the other cemeteries. It is located on a plateau, and is generally flat but slopes to the creek on the east side. Graves are arranged in well ordered rows in the western portion of the cemetery.

A 1962 aerial photo shows that Section A was filled first, with many memorial trees planted at gravesites and an allee of trees along the main avenue. Axial roads in the cemetery are or were lined with trees, and an area in the northeast corner of the site is wooded. More ornamentation of graves is found in the newer (eastern) part of the cemetery.

A variety of markers and monuments are found at Evergreen Cemetery, reflecting the availability of materials and technology over the years. These include traditional and machine-made markers, some of which feature the photorealistic etching technology available today; simple handmade markers, with and without photographs, and examples of unique works of art and craft. Evergreen contains one mausoleum, as well as plots that are defined with various forms of edging or curbing.

Issues at Evergreen Cemetery include:

- *Identity and Appearance.* The entrance is not well-marked and no wayfinding information is available. The chain link fence is in poor condition.
- *Grave Marker Conditions.* Markers are fallen and tilted, and some have been damaged by mowers and trimmers. Some handmade elements (particularly curbing, edging, and materials within plot-bounding features) are difficult to maintain and quickly become deteriorated.
- *Infrastructure.* Leaking irrigation faucets lead to ponding water near gravesites. Restroom facilities consist of a portable toilet next to the nonworking, non-ADA compliant restroom building.
- *Roadways.* The edges of roadways are degraded from people pulling off the road to park, although this is necessary since the roads are two-cars wide and the cemetery has no dedicated parking area. Avenue K and some other roadways are so close to gravesites as to present a threat from vehicular damage. In addition, in some areas, people have driven off the roadways and around/through the cemetery. Only one small area has a (recent) poured concrete curb.

- *Vegetation.* The allee of trees along the main roadway have been lost, as have many screening and ornamental evergreens. Trees in the cemetery are generally stressed by drought conditions.

Citizen comments and questions included:

- This cemetery is way behind the other cemeteries. We have some catching up to do.
- Weeds, fire ants, and burrs make it uncomfortable for mourners and visitors. Pest management needs to be a priority.
- The City should not encourage planting evergreens that have a habit of growing full near the ground, since that obscures markers.
- Are wildflowers an option to plant on graves or in other locations? What about native grasses?
- Consider using open space (easement) near the curb as a kiosk location.
- There is a need for more shade trees (not just small trees and crape myrtle) and not just at the perimeter but also along the avenues, in easements, and to provide a buffer against the street. However, you need to understand where family plots are located.
- The "fill area" in the northeast corner is not just spoils. The city used to use it as a dump, so there are a lot of things like old clothes dryers and junk in there.
- The storm drain may not go anywhere anymore; if that's the case, maybe that easement could be used for additional burials.

Oakwood Cemetery

Austin's oldest cemetery, Oakwood was established in 1839 and has evolved over time, with graves representing burial traditions from the Victorian era to today. Markers range from hand carved to hand crafted to modern and generally were made in marble, granite, and limestone. The limestone markers, especially have been degraded by irrigation practices; some marble markers have been encased in concrete, which reacts chemically with (and damages) the natural stone. The cemetery is laid out in a grid and most of the graves face east, which is typical of Christian traditions. Oakwood also contains two sections of graves associated with Temple Beth Israel.

Issues at Oakwood Cemetery include:

- *Appearance and Access.* The original entrance is in poor condition, and the perimeter is surrounded with rusted chain link fence topped with barbed wire. A pedestrian gate within is rusted and padlocked. The retaining wall along Comal Street provides a canvas for graffiti and must be repainted regularly. Views into and out of the cemetery along 12th Street are unattractive.
- *Roadways.* Gravel and silt accumulate on the main avenue. Curbs throughout the cemetery, which were built using a now-obsolete method of construction involving an initial pour of large-aggregate concrete, topped with a finer-grained layer, are damaged and disintegrating. The gravel roadways off the main avenue are narrow and have lost gravel; intersections are difficult to negotiate. Sidewalks along the

main avenue are also cracking and include sections where the concrete has been displaced.

- *Grave Marker Conditions.* Damage to grave markers is fairly widespread throughout the cemetery, and includes tilting, breaking, disassembly, and displacement; damage from irrigation systems, particularly to limestone and marble markers; sinking and subsidence of gravesites; and encasement of stone markers in concrete, which can damage the natural stone.
- *Enclosures.* Many individual and family plots are enclosed with curbing or fencing. Victorian-era cast iron or wrought iron fencing is subject to damage and theft. Stone and concrete curbing around family plots have been damaged by impacts from vehicles or mowers. Some above-ground tombs, built of stone or brick, are also deteriorated and collapsing.
- *Trees.* Tree conditions in Oakwood are generally poor, with many trees having been lost to or stressed by recent drought conditions. A large number of stumps are found throughout the cemetery. The tree survey recently completed has identified the locations and species of all remaining trees and the locations of all stumps.
- *Drainage.* The drainage channel that runs through Oakwood was built to manage a natural stream through the property. Over the years, it has degraded and become unstable in areas. It suffers from inappropriate past repairs, soil washout along the sides, cracked concrete along the bottom, and areas that are in danger of collapse. Many graves are located very close to the edges of the channel, which creates an additional problem for both continuing deterioration and potential repairs.

Citizen comments and questions included:

- People who are going to the ballpark want to cut through the cemetery instead of walking around, which is why that pedestrian gate needs to stay closed.
- We are concerned about irrigation and what will be done in addition to the hose bibs currently being installed.
- The Zilker grave plot includes stumps. Maybe trees should be replanted there. It is an important memorial.
- We need to recognize the “frontier cemetery” history, not just the Victorian era.
- There is a fire issue with cedars; historically, fire would have cleared this vegetation on a regular basis.
- The City needs to determine how to declare some plots as abandoned property so that they can be repaired.
- We are concerned about a possible plan to use reclaimed water for irrigation if it would cause a build up of salts and other detrimental minerals in the soil.
- The cemetery needs a kiosk with maps and interpretive signage.
- Wayfinding signage needs to be installed so that it points the same way that the reader is looking at the cemetery. That needs to be built into the design of the sign from the start.
- There is an issue with irrigation and broken pipes; the system is not zoned, so if you have a break, you have to shut off the entire system until it is fixed. The irrigation system needs backflow preventers, water pressure gauges, and zoning maps.

- At the Comal Street entrance, the "no parking" signs are too close to the entrance. Cars can park close to the entrance as a result, and then it causes visibility problems for people who are trying to drive out of the cemetery onto that street.
- We need to look at safety issues related to the drainage channel; people could fall in.

Oakwood Cemetery Annex

Oakwood Cemetery Annex, which was established in the early 1900s, is characterized by the looping drives that are typical of the Rural Cemetery Movement. Unlike at other cemeteries, graves here are generally oriented toward the drives, rather than in an east-facing grid. The Annex main entrance faces Oakwood Cemetery and is aligned with the older cemetery's main avenue. The caretaker's building at the Annex has been recently restored.

Grave markers within the Annex are generally monument style markers made of granite, although unique handmade markers are also present and include a series of markers ornamented with tile.

Issues at Oakwood Annex include:

- *Appearance and Access.* Like Oakwood Cemetery, the Annex is surrounded by a rusted chain link fence topped with barbed wire. No wayfinding or visitor information is available.
- *Grave Marker Conditions.* While markers at this cemetery are in generally good shape, soil conditions have contributed to displacement and tilting. Some markers have sunk into the ground and are becoming overgrown. Markers also have been displaced or broken, likely by impact from mowers. Damage from irrigations is also visible, as is biological growth (mold, mildew, lichen, moss, etc.)

Citizen comments and questions included:

- This cemetery needs new irrigation systems, not just adding new hose bibs to the old system.
- There are fewer post oaks in the cemetery now and this needs to be a priority.

Plummers Cemetery

This cemetery is an example of a rural folk Southern cemetery. It is made up of generally open space under a canopy of mostly cedar elm trees; the northern edge of the cemetery is bounded by a wooded area. A 1966 aerial photograph shows a linear pattern of trees running from southeast to northwest, parallel to the street, but many of those trees have been lost over the years. The cemetery has an undulating character and generally slopes toward the street. Grave markers in this cemetery are a mixture of modern, Victorian, military and handmade works of art and craft.

Issues at Plummers Cemetery include:

- *Identity, Appearance, and Access.* While one sign marks the entrance, this site is not identified as a historic cemetery and no information about it is currently provided. The dirt tracks that make up internal cemetery roads are not well-defined, which

makes the gravesites vulnerable to vehicular damage. A bus stop is located at the edge of the cemetery along Springdale Street, but no sidewalk access is available.

- *Grave Marker Conditions.* Many markers have suffered damage and deterioration. Cracking, breakage, and displacement are visible throughout the cemetery, as are mower and trimmer damage. Gravesites have subsided and markers have sunk, tilted, and fallen. Some markers have been embedded in concrete, which can cause damage.
- *Family Plots.* The curbing around many family plots is deteriorated, weathered, or damaged from impacts with mowers and vehicles.

Citizen comments and questions included:

- The city needs to define the boundaries with Givens Park.
- There is a homeless camp in the thicket at the back of the cemetery that has been cleaned out numerous times but keeps coming back. Can park rangers do something about that?
- Cars driving under trees is a problem.
- If people use the cemetery, it will get more attention and resources.
- The city needs to be aware of utility lines along the street as well as graves that are close to the street.

<u>Breakout Session: Programming</u>

Prior to the breakout session, Ms. McDougal introduced the topic of programming. She noted that the Master Plan team has been asked to research best practices and provide recommendations about programming, use, recreation, and heritage tourism opportunities. The team is now seeking citizen feedback on these topics.

She asked attendees to use the comment cards at each breakout table to answer the following questions:

- Cemetery Tourism: Would you support appropriate and respectful tourism programs in the mostly inactive cemeteries (Oakwood, Oakwood Annex, and Plummers)?

- Education and the Arts: How would you encourage people to learn about and be inspired by Austin's cemeteries?

- Personal Histories: What tools and/or training would make it easier for descendants, friends groups, City staff, etc. to document the histories of the people and families who are buried in the Cemeteries? What should the City do with that information?

- Recreation and Leisure: What criteria should we use to evaluate potential recreational partnerships?

Some participants, who could not stay for the breakout session, took the cards with them and said that they would email or mail their responses to Kim McKnight.

During the breakout sessions, team members collected comment cards and made note of verbal comments and suggestions. All of the comments received are paraphrased below.

Would you support appropriate and respectful tourism programs in the mostly inactive cemeteries (Oakwood, Oakwood Annex, and Plummers)?

- Yes.
- Absolutely, cemeteries in the past were shaded locations for family picnics to keep graves cleaned.
- Yes, I think it is.
- Yes!! This would be so amazing and I think people would really enjoy it.
- Yes. I believe public awareness is crucial to the cemeteries. These tours would compete the information presented by city tour guides.
- Yes.
- We enjoy the tours that SAC offers. Speaker events – all kinds of tours could be included – history of course but also geology, botany, etc.
- I'm interested in helping to promote Oakwood as an important part of Texas history – especially with visitors for UT events.
- Yes.
- Yes – it's the future for helping to maintain the cemeteries. Needs to keep in mind being respectful of the dead and living.
- Be very careful to be respectful. The (last?) events from SAC were not – parts of it were but parts were not such as band, face painting, roping an area that had graves for kids to jump over graves, tec. The Halloween event was marketed as "be scared of the cemetery" or something like this. Don't market events as scary; don't rent space for weddings or gothic Halloween events. Cemeteries are places that should be respected for their history and also because people that are significant to their families are buried there. Example you showed (docent tours) are okay – no music, nothing besides touring the cemetery in a respectful manner and no marketing that is not respectful.

How would you encourage people to learn about and be inspired by Austin's cemeteries?

- Seek partnerships with universities and public schools and non-profits to develop programs in art, architecture, history (of course) topography – any!
- I love the QR reader concept for those that can access the information. Keep up the publication of books, articles, etc. about the cemeteries.
- If our cemeteries are to survive, we need to continue educating people about the importance of history, respect, and the community.
- Yes.
- Go online. Need kiosks on each cemetery. Maps. Historical notes on these kiosks.
- SAC is already doing this with tours and events.

- Definitely involve local schools for history projects. Also local genealogy groups can be involved too.
- Online, brochures, tours (maps), virtual tour online.

What tools and/or training would make it easier for descendants, friends groups, City staff, etc. to document the histories of the people and families who are buried in the Cemeteries? What should the City do with that information?

- Online access to add information.
- A place for descendants to access information about relatives buried there.
- Some sort of grid that would show who's buried there.
- Incorporate the kiosk area as a place to put contact information if someone would like to leave information.
- Talk to the Austin History Center about being a repository for these stories and a contact point.
- There must be a way to capture histories from the obituaries used in funeral programs.
- Yes.

What criteria should we use to evaluate potential recreational partnerships?

- Yes. Only in unused areas. Live theater.
- Respect for the history of the cemeteries.
- Should not cause any damage to the cemetery.
- Yes – I lead hikes for the Sierra Club and would love to lead some cemetery hikes.
- Unsure. Tourism yes, recreation perhaps limited. I certainly would NOT encourage DOG walking or biking.
- None but walking.
- No damage possible.
- No dogs.
- [Restrict] accessibility and times of day, to prevent theft and damage to premises.
- Inclusiveness of partnership.
- Respect and goals that partnership has – how do they think they respect cemeteries?
- What do partnerships value about cemeteries?
- Beliefs/intentions
- No exercise class, no yoga, no trail, no gardening, no pets. These don't belong in a cemetery. No noise. Cemeteries should not be places that celebrate life by having these activities. Cemeteries are places to respect, to learn history, for (relatives?) to visit their deceased. They mourn, they grieve, they remember, let them have their space without adding activities that belong elsewhere.
- How will the partners treat the community, especially those with different points of view – respect them? Include them? Invite them to participate?

Agenda

Cemetery Master Plan
Public Meeting #3
10:30am–12:30pm
Saturday, August 23, 2014

Ruiz Branch, Austin Public Library
1600 Grove Blvd.
Austin, TX 78741

AGENDA

Purpose of Meeting
To share findings from the Austin Cemetery Master Plan project team regarding the current conditions of Austin's municipal cemeteries, to receive your comments, and to gather your input about potential programming opportunities in the cemeteries.

Purpose of Feedback
Feedback will be reviewed and used to help guide development of the draft master plan.

10:30 – 10:45 a.m.	Introduction, recap of Cemetery Master Plan process, and project status update
10:45 – 11:45 a.m.	Report on current conditions in the cemeteries
11:45 – 12:10 p.m.	Questions and answers
12:10 – 12:30 p.m.	Small group topic tables: Programming in the Cemeteries

Mark your calendar for Public Meeting #4
6:00-8:00 pm, Monday, November 3
Zilker Botanical Gardens
2220 Barton Springs Rd.
Austin, TX 78746

For updated information about the master plan process,
Visit: http://www.austintexas.gov/department/cemetery-master-plan
Call Kim McKnight at (512) 974-9478 or email kim.mcknight@austintexas.gov
Email kim.mcknight@austintexas.gov

The City of Austin is committed to compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.
Reasonable modifications and equal access to communications will be provided upon request.

Breakout Session Comment Cards

Cemetery Tourism

Would you support appropriate and respectful tourism programs in the mostly inactive cemeteries (Oakwood, Oakwood Annex, and Plummers)?

Personal Histories

What tools and/or training would make it easier for descendants, friends groups, City staff, etc. to document the histories of the people and families who are buried in the cemeteries?

What should the City do with that information?

Education and the Arts

How would you encourage people to learn about and be inspired by Austin's cemeteries?

Recreation

What criteria should we use to evaluate potential recreational partnerships?