

**City of Austin  
CEMETERY  
MASTER PLAN**

**DRAFT**

*Presented by  
Save Austin's Cemeteries  
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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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# City of Austin Cemetery Master Plan

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## Introduction

A good master plan is a comprehensive picture of the cemetery's physical and fiscal future. It should encompass strategic engineering, operational, marketing, and financial planning. Although sometimes considered to only be a land-planning tool, a master plan is a foundation for many important decisions that cemetery directors and managers must make. A master plan is an important ingredient in planning cash flow, as well as meeting the inventory need of the sales force. It is also an essential ingredient to developing a financial model to test the adequacy of a cemetery's endowment care fund.<sup>1</sup>

*Excerpt from Cultural Landscapes Report*

**Public Cemeteries** - Public cemeteries are often the most enduring link to a community's past because they do not undergo as much change as the rest of the urban landscape over time. At the same time, they are very complex cultural landscapes. Monuments, structures, and funerary practices represented within reflect historically divergent economic and social differences within a community. These cemeteries often contain the graves of the most influential people in the history of a community, as well as the least powerful, represented by the commonly titled "pauper grounds." Within cemeteries, one can often find unique works of fine art, as well as vernacular craft, usually in the form of sculpture, carvings, or decorative assemblages. Other monuments and structures reflect historic regional and national trends in craft, manufacturing, marketing, and distribution of products, such as the products of late 19th century mass production and rail transportation.

Despite their importance as repositories of community cultural, social, artistic, and economic history, many nineteenth-century American urban cemeteries are deteriorating and declining at an accelerated pace. Although many of these cemeteries began as self-supporting perpetual care sites, many are no longer income-producing because most of the plots within them have already been sold and there is no other source for ongoing maintenance.

Because many of the original initiating associations are now defunct, urban cemetery care is now in the hands of already overburdened municipal governments and is often considered a drain on maintenance budgets. Minimal care leads to the ongoing deterioration of structures, monuments, historic vegetation, and other historic resources within these cemeteries.

Because of this decline, these once maintained urban green spaces become less attractive, which in turn makes them less important to the community.

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<sup>1</sup> A Cemetery should be forever – John F. Llewellyn

## **Section 1: Site History**

Because we have five historic cemeteries, this section will have five brief histories to help the reader understand that sites unique history.

## **Section 2: Condition Surveys**

### **Documentation of the current infrastructure's condition:**

- Roadways - asphalt paved and dirt roads
- Perimeter fencing and retaining walls
- Utilities- electric, natural gas, water, sewer
- Structures – chapel/office 1914
- Drainage – open storm water canal that runs North-South
- Landscape features – trees and historic plantings
- Irrigation system
- Waste disposal – trash and organic material

**Monuments:** Many are broken, some have fallen, and a few may pose a risk of causing bodily injury if leaned against. All monuments are the property of the families who placed them there. The city has no financial responsibility for their upkeep. We recognize that due to the age of the site that some families have moved away from the area, some have died out, and those that are still around may not be willing to support the cost of repair/resetting. With the assistance of city legal department, a process of determining when a monument could be considered abandoned property needs to be developed, thereby allowing persons with an approved preservation plan to perform the necessary steps to preserve the monument.

### **Key First Steps**

- Update site map
- Develop a Monument Survey Data Sheet
- Involve the community
- Accurately record information on/about monuments
- Photograph with digital & 35 mm print film
- Organize information in a database
- Archive data at several locations

### **Section 3: Conservation Treatment Plan**

An important first step will be to develop an advisory board that reviews any proposed changes in policy or improvements, or proposed restoration work to ensure that the style and craftsmanship of the work is consistent with original design, and within the guidelines set forth by the United States Department of Interior.

Once the documentation and condition assessments are completed, SAC will identify current practices that may be contributing to the damage of monuments, curbing, and other historic structures.

#### **Key points in developing a Conservation Treatment Plan are:**

- Involve professionals
- Conservatorship: develop a plan for working on abandoned monuments
- Open opportunities for preservation majors at University of Texas, Austin
- Identify conservation needs
- Emergency stabilization
- Safety issues
- Landscape stabilization
- Establish priorities
- Develop a treatment and documentation protocol
- Undertake field work

## **Section 4: Maintenance Plan**

**Establishing a maintenance standard:** a few of our cemeteries were never designed to be a modern memorial park. There is often confusion over terms used such as “perpetual care”. Many items one would assume are covered in the contract are beyond the scope of the contractor. A “Standard of Care” needs to be established and published so all parties understand the city’s commitment and assumed responsibility for the care of each historic site.

One way to minimize any accidental damage to monuments and landscape elements is to develop a maintenance plan. A maintenance plan should specify:

- Day-to-day activities
- Spoils management
- Regular inspections
- Mowing and equipment needs
- Evasive growth removal
- Periodic maintenance
- Historic structure reviews
- Tree program
- Irrigation evaluation
- Education/training requirements for staff and volunteers

## **Section 5: Emergency Preparedness Plan**

Severe weather events and random acts of vandalism can have a devastating effect on an historic cemetery in a short period of time. Our first and foremost concern will be personal safety. Many of the monuments may be unstable and damaged trees can shift with winds and continue to drop large branches.

After the discovery of a weather event or an act of vandalism, the following events should take place:

**Notification:** A callback list will be generated to inform the necessary parties, depending on the type of event.

**Release of information to the public:** in the event a city public information officer is not available, ONLY a designated person will speak to the media about events and the course of action being taken.

**Crime scene preservation:** if a large vandalism event has occurred, the contractor's designee may close the site to the public until initial investigation is completed.

**Documentation:** on the callback list, there will be a list of volunteers who will work with an approved format to photo document any damage. All photos will be downloaded and notes turned over to the lead person before leaving the site.

**Structural Stabilization:** areas will be roped off and signage placed if a risk to the public is determined.

**Initial cleaning and repair**

## **Section 6: Recordkeeping**

Sometime in the past, the historic “Day Books” that recorded each internment were placed at the Austin History Center. A computer database was created by city employees and has been added to as each additional burial took place. This database has many errors and is not formatted in an easily cross-searched format.

For better and more accurate record, have PARD and InterCare implement a different database, such as Microsoft Access, that could update and manage the burial records, as well as ownership records, space availability, and routine tasks, and that also has the capacity to generate reports for quarterly review.

Available internment space: determine which lots have space available, and those that are full.

## **Section 7: Expanding Partnerships**

**Other City Departments:** Move some of the responsibility for the upkeep of a portion of the site's infrastructure back to other city departments. It is beyond the scope of the maintenance contract with InterCare to resurface the paved roadways, engineer and repair failing retaining walls/drainage canals, or to tend to the needs of the over 1,000 mature trees on site.

**Non-Profit and Citizens Groups:** There are many groups that have ties to each of the cities five cemeteries. Establish a way for them to network, whereby these groups can share knowledge with each other and work to achieve the goals set forth in a master plan.

Develop memorandums of understandings with each group.

## **Section 8: Funding**

A review of the current cemetery fund, its projected earnings, and the real cost of bringing all of the five cemetery properties up to an established standard is recommended.

Research and seek out alternative funding sources, such as grants, walking tours, and donation of materials/labor to achieve stated goals.

## **Implementation**

With the adoption of the Cemetery Master Plan by City Council, this document will not only act as a directive for those parties charged for the care and maintenance of all city cemeteries. it will also serve as a foundation, whereby the cemeteries can be evaluated, and their needs placed into its frame work, thereby allowing the Parks Department to best manage the needs of all five city cemeteries.

We consider the establishment of a Cemetery Advisory Board to be the top priority once a Master Plan is adopted. This board could consist of the following six positions:

A member from PARD who has knowledge of the budget and current contract

A representative from InterCare Corp. (the current contract holder)

A representative from the city's Historic Preservation Office

Three members at large who would act as representatives of the five city cemeteries:

Member 1 – Austin Memorial Park

Member 2 – Oakwood and Oakwood Annex

Member 3 – Evergreen and Plummer's

This body would meet at regularly scheduled times in an open forum to review the progress of the Master Plan and to receive and review recommendations from groups working on the established goals. These recommendations would then be presented to city council for approval.