

Speak Now, or They May Not Rest In Peace:

The case for incorporating historic municipal cemeteries into Austin's Comprehensive Plan

Save Austin's Cemeteries
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Imagine Austin – The City of Austin's Comprehensive Plan

Can you imagine Austin with crumbling cemetery gates, overgrown cemetery grounds where descendants despair at the thought of how their family members are being treated? Where future development of housing, commercial buildings or City parks is interrupted by inadvertent discovery of human remains because the City can't afford to map burials at the edges of existing cemeteries? How about an Austin whose unique identity makes no reference to the colorful mix of people who settled Austin and helped it grow?

Our historic city cemeteries – Oakwood, Oakwood Annex, Plummers, Evergreen/Highland Park, and Austin Memorial Park – are the urban landscapes that bring the connection to our past to life. Whether you have family buried there connecting you to your personal heritage, or you play in Zilker Park, eat at Kerbey Lane, travel via Bergstrom Airport, are a fan of James Michener, or play at Givens Park – you have a connection to the graves, monuments, and landscapes of Austin's cemeteries.

Austinites created Austin's iconic places, and many of them are named after people whose eternal rest was entrusted to the City. The City established municipal cemeteries to honor that trust, and to serve as community assets that bring beauty, nature, and serenity to our lives.

The City's Comprehensive Plan must include provisions for the integration of these public properties as community assets within the broader goals for Austin's vibrant future. Communities across the country promote their historic cemeteries in tourism, economic development, neighborhood improvement, and branding for smart growth. Why would Austin overlook the opportunity to do the same?

Why is it important that we speak up about historic cemeteries in the City's comprehensive planning process? Because if it's not in the Plan, it's not on the official to-do list -- and if it's not on that list, it doesn't get funding, staffing or political support. As explained on the Imagine Austin website (<http://imagineaustin.net/about.htm>):

“The Comprehensive Plan provides broad-level guidance on how Austin will grow and develop into the future. According to the City Charter, the Comprehensive Plan contains "the council's policies for growth, development and beautification of the land within the corporate limits and the extraterritorial jurisdiction of the city.”

A Comprehensive Plan is:

- A guide for the management of change
- A reflection of community values and aspirations
- The foundation for policies, strategies, and actions
- The community's to-do list
- A catalyst for community consensus”

Myth or Misconception: C’mon, it can’t be that big of a deal, right?

Actually, it is. Cities inherit their powers from the State, and part of that relationship is based on the requirement that cities adopt comprehensive plans as legal documents that define the responsibilities and limits of how the city will use those powers. As explained on the City of Austin’s website (http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/compplan/comp_plan_faq.htm#legal):

“After a comprehensive plan is adopted, any public or private development, regulatory policy, or public expenditure of funds must be in conformance with the plan. The Austin City Charter, [Article X: "Planning,"](#) states that:

No public or private development shall be permitted, except in conformity with such adopted comprehensive plan or element or portion thereof, prepared and adopted in conformity with the provisions of this article.

Upon adoption of a comprehensive plan or element or portion thereof by the city council, all land development regulations including zoning and map, subdivision regulations, roadway plan, all public improvements, public facilities, public utilities projects and all city regulatory actions relating to the land use, subdivision and development approval shall be consistent with the comprehensive plan, element or portion thereof as adopted.”

Myth or Misconception: Well, that’s okay. Cemeteries are part of the Parks and Recreation department, and there’s a Parks and Recreation chapter of the comprehensive plan, so we’re covered, right?

Right now, the draft *Imagine Austin* Parks & Recreation document doesn’t mention the word cemetery, and doesn’t list any of the cemeteries as PARD facilities. The “Imagine Austin” project is an attempt to do the planning process the way it’s designed to be done: gather data, gather public input, analyze the trends indicated in the data and develop goals, policies and programs that best reflect the community’s interests in managing those trends towards a preferred future. NOTE that it all starts with having the right data.

Toward that end, the City’s consultants have developed draft chapters of “The Community Inventory” (<http://imagineaustin.net/inventory.htm>), with 11 categories of data including Parks and Recreation. The January 11, 2010 draft of that chapter NEVER mentions cemeteries in 26 pages of discussion. Literally, a “find” search for the words “cemetery” and “cemeteries” came up empty.

Myth or Misconception: Wow, it really is important that we make sure cemeteries are included in the comprehensive plan. But if we can’t get it done this year, there’s always next time, so what’s all the urgency about?

Comprehensive plans are long range plans, addressing trends in community development. They lay the groundwork for more immediate and short-term programs. Therefore, they are typically adopted with a 10-year lifespan, sometimes longer. Though the intention is always to prepare updates every 5 years, you can only update what’s already there – if the word “cemetery” doesn’t even show up in the adopted plan, it’s unlikely that it would be introduced during the update process. In Austin’s case, our current comprehensive plan was adopted in 1979 and has been amended through adoption of neighborhood or traffic plans – but it’s been 30 years since we had a comprehensive public process for planning Austin’s future!!

Please get involved and speak up for responsible inclusion of Austin’s historic city cemeteries in the 2011 Comprehensive Plan! Let the City know that we can’t *Imagine Austin* without them!