Austin Cemeteries Master Plan

Community Meeting #2 — Summary Report
Steph McDougal, McDoux Preservation LLC
June 28, 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 second community meeting was held on Thursday, June 26, 2014, from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. at the Northwest Recreation Center at 2913 Northland Drive, adjacent to Austin Memorial Park Cemetery. Approximately 40 people attended the meeting.

Project team members in attendance included:

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

Jill Madden (AmaTerra) also was present and assisted with the breakout portion of the meeting.

The presentation portion of the meeting included a review of project goals and project status, a summary of the stakeholder interview process and results, and an introduction to the kinds of signage and interpretive markers often found in cemeteries. The meeting also included an opportunity for participants to ask questions, and a breakout session, where people were encouraged to share their opinions on signage needs.

As they arrived, attendees were asked to sign in at the door. They received several handouts, including an agenda and a Memory Workshop worksheet (handouts attached at the end of this document).

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. Mr. Miller indicated that much of the GIS mapping and digitization was complete, as was the tree survey. The conditions assessment is on its way to being completed by the end of the summer, and historical landcape architect Laura Knott (John Milner Associates, Inc.) will present her findings in that area at the next meeting in August.

Stakeholder Interviews

Ms. McDougal discussed the stakeholder interview process, which took place during May and June 2014. Ms. McDougal contacted a total of 58 people, representing community and civic leaders, religious institutions, neighborhood associations, nearby residents, and members of community organizations (such as Save Austin's Cemeteries). Twenty-five people agreed to participate in the interviews. Ms. McDougal reported that the interview questions sought to discover:

- How will you know if the master plan development process is a success?
- How do you feel about concepts such as partnerships between the City and community organizations?
- How do you feel about developing the cemeteries as valuable community resources?

Ms. McDougal noted that many of the interviewees agreed on issues, including:

- The need for a higher level of maintenance that is equal across all cemeteries
- Concerns about drought-stressed and dead and dying trees must be
- Requests for more signage and information to help visitors locate graves

Interviewees also expressed a concern that the City might not act on, or adequately fund, the activities that would be included in the master plan. While respondents generally were in favor of the City seeking partnerships with like-minded community organizations, they were emphatic that the City should not delegate its responsibilities for maintaining the cemeteries. The interviewees stated that they lack confidence and trust in the City government, in general, although not in Ms. McKnight or the Parks and Recreation Department specifically.

Ms. McDougal also described several areas of disagreement among interviewees, including opinions about whether "stakeholders" should include only those people who own plots or have loved ones buried in the cemeteries, or if that term should be used to describe anyone with an interest in Austin's cemeteries. Ms. McDougal indicated that she had cast a wide net and attempted to gather data from a broad sample of people representing the diversity of the Austin community.

Another area of disagreement concerned whether cemeteries should be used for any purpose other than burials, such as heritage tourism or educational programming. Ms. McDougal stated that many interviewees agreed, however, that it could be appropriate to treat Oakwood Cemetery, Oakwood Cemetery Annex, and Plummers Cemetery as cultural

resources and engage the community in heritage and educational programming in those cemeteries, because only a few burials take place each year there. However, because several hundred people are buried each year at Austin Memorial Park Cemetery and Evergreen Cemetery, those cemeteries might not be as appropriate for programming and activities.

Questions and Answers

Prior to beginning the breakout session, Ms. McDougal opened the floor to questions from the audience, including:

- *When cutting down trees that are considered dead or dying, can you consider the potential for that species to recover and make exceptions, rather than just cutting down all of the drought-stressed trees?*

  Ms. McKnight explained how the tree survey information would be used to help the City's Urban Forestry department manage and treat trees. Steph McDougal indicated that she also would pass along this request to Ms. Knott.

- *Will the master plan include replanting grasses such as zoysia or buffalo grass?*

  The master plan will include recommendations for turf replanting and management in the cemeteries.

- *Will the master plan include something about fencing? The cyclone fence at Austin Memorial Park Cemetery is in poor repair. There used to be a rock wall along Hancock Road.*

  Yes, the master plan will include recommendations for fencing.

- *Will the master plan include recommendations for planting more trees, not just dealing with the ones that are already there?*

  Yes.

- *Can dead trees be carved into artworks instead of removed altogether?*

  Ms. McKnight said that she encourages ideas that bring more art into public places. Ms. McDougal stated that this was done in Galveston, after Hurricane Ike killed many live oak trees in that community. The audience seemed to be in favor of such an activity.

- *Could the City of Austin partner with the State Cemetery to take advantage of what they're already doing with signage and technology or to share costs?*

  Ms. McKnight indicated that we could look into that sort of a partnership.

- *How long will it take the City to take action, once they receive the master plan and its recommendations? Two or three years?*

  Ms. McDougal stated that the team is sending information to the City right now, not waiting to send everything in March. Ms. McKnight indicated that the timing was good to include funding for many of the master plan recommendations in the next bond election. She also noted that funding is already being made available for some of the most pressing matters, such as repairing the irrigation system and dealing with cemetery trees.

Several attendees also shared comments.

- *In the past, volunteer groups have taken courses to learn to identify non-native tree species and have received grants for water so that they can irrigate individual trees.*

  Ms. McKnight reminded the audience that the City adheres to the same water restrictions as the rest of the community. As a result, they are limited in terms of how much, and how often, they can water. The master plan will provide recommendations for watering. Ms. McKnight pointed out that some tree species can be harmed by overwatering, as well as underwatering.

- *Ball moss appears to be killing an oak tree in Austin Memorial Park Cemetery.*

  Ms. McDougal said that she would follow up with Ms. Knott, who deferred to the Parks Department. Ms. McKnight asked Alan Halter to respond. He said, "Contrary to popular belief, ball moss is not as destructive as it is unsightly. It is not parasitic and it does not deprive trees of nutrients. However, ball moss can be a sign of poor health. Heavy infestations can minimize sun exposure to the tree's branches and add extra weight causing limbs to fall. That's what I would assume is the case at AMP. Ball moss tends to grow on limbs and branches that are already dead, so if the tree is in poor condition I would assume some other, more significant, factor is to blame such as lack of sufficient water, large amounts of internal decay, or root failure. As far as I know, PARD doesn't have any existing policies for ball moss removal simply because there tend to be more severe tree care issues needing attention. If action is taken it's usually in the form of pruning dead wood and thinning out the tree's canopy to allow more sunlight in since ball moss can't thrive in high sun exposure. Manual removal is another option but often dangerous and takes time. Spraying chemicals is not an option with us. My coworker Regina Ramos said she attended a volunteer event for It's My Park Day a few years back where they removed ball moss. They did so by spraying water with high pressure hoses. This might be the most viable option if there is extensive ball moss infestations with live oaks at the cemeteries. If the citizen is particularly concerned about an individual tree, he can place a request through 311 and we'll have a Forestry Tech inspect the tree for maintenance work to be conducted." Ms. McDougal obtained the citizen's telephone number after the meeting and has called him to share this information.

- *A QR code or other electronic-based tourism could be used as a way to generate revenue for the cemeteries, by charging people for access.*

<u>Breakout Session: Signage and Interpretation</u>

Prior to the breakout session, Ms. McDougal shared some basic information about the types of signs often found in cemeteries. She asked attendees to use the comment cards at each breakout table to indicate what they wanted to find, know, and learn when they visit a cemetery, as well as whether/how they might want to use technology to access information.

Wayfinding signs help people navigate within a space. Examples include street signs, directional sign, and cemetery section markers.

Informational signs are used to tell people about rules and regulations, or to convey straightforward facts, such as the hours when a cemetery is open to the public. Notice boards or information kiosks can be used to share information that is likely to change on a regular basis.

Interpretive signs provide information, but they also tell a story, explain concepts, and highlight important historical events and people. Interpretive signs help people understand what they are viewing. Interpretive signs often take the form of large illustrated panels in order to convey as much information as possible.

Technology (particularly for smartphones) can be used to replace permanent signage while providing similar information. QR (Quick Response) codes are being used on a few test signs in Oakwood Cemetery. When QR codes are scanned by a smartphone that is equipped with a QR code reader, the phone automatically opens a corresponding website. In cemeteries, QR codes can be used to provide information about a specific person. Cell phone tours are also popular at historic sites.

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.

The signs used for breakout session tables consisted of posters mounted and displayed on tabletop easels. The posters were created in Adobe Illustrator and printed at Office Depot for about $4.50 each.

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.

Wayfinding Signs: What do you need to FIND when you visit a cemetery?

- Graves of my family and friends
- Restrooms
- Office personnel
- Special features of historical or natural interest
- Relatives that are buried there but location unknown
- I think it would be nice to name streets (Oakwood) and have addresses for family plots. Then, at the office, there could be a kiosk map with a key to locate each plot and directions or paper maps or maps you could access via cell phone.
- I would like to see street signs for cemeteries that have street names.
- I think section numbers could be very important for people looking for a specific family member. When I first found my great-grandmother, I had a section number and a lot number. A member of SAC helped me find her gravesite.
- Signs – please be attractive and fit in all natural environs.
- Physical signs should be markers: plot number, row number, north side. This would reduce further expense in replacement due to vandalism and age. Then printed hand-out maps can guide visitors through the cemetery by markers, plots, directions, etc.
- Section signs would be helpful, along with easy-to-read maps.

Interpretive Signs: What do you want to LEARN when you visit a cemetery?

- NOTHING!
- Historical personages
- Natural features
- Volunteer opportunities
- Where historical figures are buried and the history about them
- History of the cemetery
- Most illustrious monuments – ones "not to be missed"
- I want to know what "famous" or "infamous" people are buried there and <u>briefly</u> how to find them.
- I think there should be heritage tours (Oakwood) and make it beautiful like the State Cemetery.
- While this may be a slap in the face at the name of Oakwood Cemetery, I am more interested in (1) the cemeteries' history, (2) history in relation to Austin of the people buried there.
- Signs should certainly be in scale to its surroundings.
- Signs should be appropriately located (i.e., near entrances/exits and/or along main streets or lanes).
- Signs should certainly be coordinated so that they all look the same and of material that is able to survive the elements, including ultraviolet light.

- Zilker Park and Capitol grounds both have walking self-guided tree tours. Make one for cemetery. Possible partner: Tree Folks.
- Use Austin Ghost Tours to assist with interpretation (possible partner).

Informational Signs: What do you need to KNOW when you visit a cemetery?

- Rules (multiple comments)
- Maps (multiple comments)
- Historical personages
- Historical information
- Natural features
- Directions
- Cemetery hours
- Welcome sign
- How to be a supporter
- I like the kiosk with map and a tour you could take on your own.
- Must be vandal-proof and graffiti-resistant.
- Very limited informational signs, please.

Technology: How do you want to ACCESS information?

- Online.
- QR code = awesome. Do it for a self tour (Oakwood). I like all of this!
- Smartphone tours, maps, directions
- Self-guided tours through cemeteries with historical figures
- I would not want multiple technologies to be obtrusive or unattractive in the cemetery. I believe technology is an important part of interpretation and location for visitors from out of town or out of our area.

Memory Worksheet

A McDoux volunteer was available to scan photos or documents, but no one brought any. Participants also had the opportunity to share information about their family traditions. One person chose to complete and return the Memory Worksheet during the meeting, although others took the worksheets with them and may return this information at a later date.

Conclusion

Action items coming out of the meeting include:

- Prepare meeting summary report. (Steph)
- Respond to Mr. Casey about ball moss. (Steph)

Agenda

Cemetery Master Plan
Public Meeting #2
6–8pm, June 26, 2014

Northwest Recreation Center
2913 Northland Drive
Austin, TX 78757

AGENDA

Purpose of Meeting
To update the status of the Austin Cemetery Master Plan project, to receive your comments, and to gather your input to assist the project team in identifying the informational needs of visitors to the cemeteries.

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

6:00 – 6:15 p.m.	Introduction and recap of Cemetery Master Plan process
6:15 – 6:30 p.m.	Project status update and opportunities to participate
6:30 – 6:45 p.m.	Report on stakeholder interview process and findings
6:45 – 7:00 p.m.	Introduction to signage in cemeteries
7:00 – 7:30 p.m.	Questions and answers
7:30 – 7:50 p.m.	Small group topic tables
7:50 – 8:00 p.m.	Wrap-up

Mark your calendar for Public Meeting #3
10:30am–12:30pm Saturday, August 23, 2014
Ruiz Branch Library
1600 Grove Blvd, Austin, TX 78741

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

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

WayfindingSigns

What do you need to FIND when you visit a cemetery?

Informational Signs

What do you need to KNOW when you visit a cemetery?

InterpretiveSigns

What do you want to LEARN when you visit a cemetery?

Technology

How do you want to ACCESS information?

Memory Worksheet

Memory Workshop #2

CITY OF AUSTIN CEMETERIES MASTER PLAN PROJECT

Do your family traditions involve visiting a cemetery?

Please share your memory of an activity or event that is or was especially meaningful to you.

If the City of Austin may reproduce all or part of this information, please check the box and sign below. We will not excerpt or print any memory stories without your written permission.

❑ Yes, I give the City of Austin, Texas, my permission to use the information provided above in the preparation of the Cemeteries Master Plan and final report.

Signature _____

Printed Name _____ Date: _____

Need more time?
Mail or email your memories of Austin city cemeteries to us at memories@austincemeteryplan.com or Cemetery Plan, P. O. Box 1556, Kemah, TX 77565.