



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council

FROM: Kimberly A. McNeeley, CPRP, Acting Director
Austin Parks and Recreation Department

DATE: May 1, 2017

SUBJECT: Oakwood Chapel Rehabilitation Project and Archeological Findings

This is follow-up to the memo dated March 6, 2017, notifying City Council of the previously unknown burials discovered underneath the Oakwood Chapel. Since community notification began in early March, the Parks and Recreation Department (PARD), together with Council Member Houston's office, hosted the following notification and outreach meetings:

- March 4 – Notification to local clergy and Six Square (Austin's African American Cultural Heritage District) leadership
- March 7– Press conference led by Council Member Houston and media advisories
- March 25 – Community Conversation on Oakwood Chapel findings (followed by open feedback period through April 7)
- April 11 - Community Conversation on Oakwood Chapel findings #2 (followed by open feedback period through April 21)

The purpose of these meetings was to provide a summary of the history of Oakwood Cemetery and Chapel, the current rehabilitation project and information related to the burials discovered beneath the Chapel and, to engage in a community dialogue regarding a resolution for the burials. Further, PARD solicited recommendations for on-site commemoration and interpretation. Community feedback regarding the final disposition of the burials has been varied and there is not a universal consensus.

PARD is recommending that the recently discovered burials within the footprint of the Oakwood Chapel, where safely recoverable, be exhumed and re-interred in close proximity to the Chapel and within the section of the cemetery historically called the "Colored Grounds." This recommendation is supported by regulatory and professional feedback, precedent cases as well as some of the community input by community members that are descendants of people who were interred in this segregated section of the cemetery. The Department's final recommendation and all criteria related to this decision is documented within a staff report available on the project website: www.austintexas.gov/oakwoodchapel.

As communicated to the public and as stated in the staff report, there are limitations to exhuming every burial that may be discovered due to constraints imposed by the building's structural grade beams. PARD pledges to work with the community to develop strong elements of interpretation and commemoration for all the burials that have been discovered, which will lead to a better understanding of the historically significant section of the cemetery for people of color. Information related to the commemorative and interpretive part of this process will be available later in the spring.

Background information:

The historic Oakwood Cemetery Chapel was constructed in 1914 to function as a mortuary chapel. It sits within the Oakwood Cemetery, a City of Austin Historic Landmark, a registered Historic Texas Cemetery, and a National Register of Historic Places site. The Parks and Recreation Department (PARD) is in the process of rehabilitating this structure for use as a visitor center and community space. Construction began in October 2016.

The Chapel was constructed in an area of the cemetery that was designated as a racially segregated section. Within this section, there is little documentation of burials and few remaining gravestones. Given the sensitivity of the cemetery site, PARD contracted with an archeological firm and secured an Antiquities Permit with the Texas Historical Commission (THC) prior to construction. No site disturbance has taken place without monitoring by the archeological team.

On Nov. 29, 2016, while drilling a pier shaft from the Chapel interior, small bone fragments were discovered by the archeological team. All construction activity was immediately halted. The THC, City Council District 1 Member Ora Houston and City leadership were immediately informed.

With direction from the THC, the contractor and archeological team proceeded with closely monitored soil removal in order to better understand the scope and scale of potential burials. As of February 13, approximately 3.5' of soil has been removed throughout the Chapel interior, which allowed the archeological team to assemble a more complete assessment of indicated burials within the building footprint.

Except for objects discovered during scraping (including several small bone fragments), no exhumations have taken place. The total number of burials is estimated at 25. Based on visual evidence of soil discoloration, actual totals could fluctuate.

Should you have any questions, please contact my office at (512) 974-6717.

Cc: Elaine Hart, Interim City Manager
Sara L. Hensley, CPRP, Interim Assistant City Manager
Liana Kallivoka, P.E., PhD, Assistant Director, Austin Parks and Recreation Department