



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and City Council

THRU: Christopher Shorter, Assistant City Manager

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

DATE: December 13, 2019

SUBJECT: Oakwood Cemetery Archeological Findings Update

The purpose of this memo is to update City Council on the next steps for the reinterment, memorialization, and educational outreach related to burials that were discovered beneath the Oakwood Cemetery Chapel during its rehabilitation. To recount, archeologists monitoring the construction at the Oakwood Chapel halted work in late 2016 when human remains were discovered. After months of investigation, it was confirmed that the chapel had been constructed over grave sites. The 1914 chapel was constructed in a racially segregated section of the cemetery known as the “Historic Colored Grounds.”

In March 2017, the Parks and Recreation Department (PARP) informed the community of the discovered burials and announced community engagement opportunities to help PARP determine next steps. Following outreach and public meetings with the community, it was determined that the burials would be exhumed. A May 1, 2017 [memo](#) to Austin City Council provided information about PARP’s determination and a [staff report](#) summarized the community engagement process and further explained the decision-making framework and criteria behind PARP’s recommendation to exhume the burials.

The exhumation process began in late spring 2017 and took several months to complete. Under the requirements of the issued Antiquities Permit through the Texas Historical Commission, a bioarcheological analysis is both necessary and appropriate for any exhumed burials. Following the careful exhumation of burials by the archeological team, the remains were transferred to Texas State University for professional analysis. The Texas State University burial context was provided by a non-invasive analysis of the physical remains, which often provides demographic data, including race and ethnicity, gender and approximate age. In some cases, physical remains can also inform about cause of death and aspects of lifestyle, such as physical health, levels of nutrition or stresses endured. Further, artifacts may reveal aspects of material culture and possibly the cultural significance for those buried in this section.

The process does not provide information about the individual identities of the people who were discovered. The archeological report is expected to be finalized in early 2020 and will be shared with the public.

The next step in the process will be the reinterment of the burials within Oakwood Cemetery, which is anticipated to take place in early 2020. As recommended in the 2017 public engagement process, all reinterments will be sited in proximity to the Oakwood Chapel. Once the reinterment process is completed, the burials will be memorialized with commemorative markers.

Following the reinterment, PARD will initiate a commemoration process. This work is still in the planning phase and more information will be forthcoming in spring 2020. The commemorative process offers an opportunity for reflection about a past injustice while honoring the people who were rediscovered during the Chapel rehabilitation.

This process may include but is not limited to:

- Ceremony to honor the individuals who were rediscovered and reinterred in Oakwood Cemetery. At the same time, PARD will dedicate of a permanent memorial that explains the exhumation and reinterment process and honors the individuals who were rediscovered in this process.
- An educational symposium to allow for further exploration of the cultural context of the people who have been re-discovered and reinterred. The symposium will allow community members to hear from expert archeological professionals to provide context for the report and allow for community conversations about the findings.
- A digital exhibit at Oakwood Chapel that interprets the archeological findings.
- An interpretive plan and signage for the “Historic Colored Grounds” as recommended in the Historic Cemeteries Master Plan. The archeological report will help inform the opportunities to better honor and interpret this historically significant section of the cemetery.

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

cc: Spencer Cronk, City Manager
Nuria Rivera-Vandermyde, Deputy City Manager