



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and City Council Members

THRU: Shannon Jones, Interim Assistant City Manager

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

DATE: February 2, 2021

SUBJECT: Oakwood Cemetery Updates

The purpose of this memo is to update City Council on recent special events and project updates related to Oakwood Cemetery. The Parks and Recreation Department (PARD) continues to work on an archeological project that began in 2017 with the discovery that the historic 1914 Oakwood Chapel had been constructed over existing graves. In the May 14, 2020, [memo](#) to City Council, PARD provided an update regarding the completion of reports from the archeological and bio-archeological analysis of the individuals as well as community engagement and educational outreach activities.

As part of the educational outreach for the Oakwood Chapel archeological project, PARD produced *All Together Here: A Community Symposium for Discovery and Remembrance*, a free, online two-day symposium held in October 2020, for more than 300 registrants. The symposium featured sessions from 40 nationally renowned archeologists, anthropologists, historians, and community activists about the archeological findings and comparative projects from around the country. The symposium further engaged the community for ideas related to memorialization of the people who were found. The symposium sessions are featured [online](#) on PARD's YouTube Channel. The Department has also produced an online exhibit, [All Together Here](#), about the archeological and bioarcheological findings.

The Department is making progress on the DNA analysis of the individuals who were exhumed during the chapel restoration. The Department notified City Council in a June 18, 2020, [memo](#) about an academic partnership with the University of Connecticut and the University of Texas to undertake DNA analysis, at no cost to the City of Austin, to better understand the lives of the men, women, and children who were discovered. The DNA analysis is underway following the issuance of an Antiquities Permit from the Texas Historical Commission in late fall of 2020. The analysis of DNA from the people who were exhumed offers a unique opportunity to learn more about their identities, familial connections, and life experiences. If the preservation of the DNA in the Oakwood Cemetery remains is sufficient to permit these analyses, living individuals who think they may have a familial connection may be able to submit a saliva sample to the University of Connecticut lab for DNA analysis, allowing relatedness to be assessed. As soon as feasible, PARD will provide further details to community members on how they may work directly with the University of Connecticut research team to explore whether they have a family relation to any of the exhumed individuals. The DNA extraction component of the project is expected to be

completed in Summer 2021. Once completed, PARD will proceed with reinterment of the exhumed individuals with assistance from Weston Solutions and Amaterra Environmental, Inc. While reinterment will proceed, the analysis component is a lengthy and complex process and may continue for 36 months. Additionally, the team is exploring undertaking isotopic analysis in conjunction with the DNA analysis, which may provide additional insights into the diets and regions of origin of the individuals. PARD intends to reinter individuals close to the Oakwood Chapel, which was a recommendation from PARD's community engagement process in 2017. The reinterment process will require mechanical scraping and monitoring to ensure that the selected reinterment sites are devoid of unmarked burials. Following the reinterment, PARD intends to collaborate with the community to host a ceremony to memorialize the individuals who were reinterred. The timeline for an in-person ceremony will be dependent on the status of the public health crisis.

Background

To recount, archeologists monitoring construction related to the Oakwood Chapel restoration 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 historically as the "Colored Grounds," although, this specific area appears to be diverse in terms of race and ethnicity.

The Department informed the community of the discovered burials and announced community engagement opportunities to help PARD 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 PARD's determination and a [staff report](#) summarized the community engagement process and further explained the decision-making framework and criteria behind PARD'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 would occur for any exhumed burials. Following the careful exhumation of burials by the archeological team, the remains were transferred to the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State University for analysis. Burial context can be inferred by a non-invasive and non-destructive 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 cause of death and aspects of lifestyle, such as physical health, levels of nutrition, or stresses endured. Further, artifacts helped to date the burials and provide potential cultural significance for those buried in this section.

This analysis of the remains, which date to the mid to late 1800s, is complete and the report is posted on our project [website](#). The report was developed by the archeological contractor for the Oakwood Chapel project, Hicks & Company Environmental/Archeological Consultants, and their sub-consultant, the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State University. The reports were also reviewed by the Texas Historical Commission.

PARD will continue to update City Council and community members on the process. Should you have any questions, please contact my office at (512) 974-6717.

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