



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and City Council

FROM: Sara L. Hensley, CPRP, Director
Austin Parks and Recreation Department

DATE: March 6, 2017

SUBJECT: Oakwood Chapel Rehabilitation Project and Archeological Investigation

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 (PAR) has been in the process of rehabilitating this structure, beginning October 2016, for use as a visitor's center and community space.

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 there are few remaining gravestones. Given the sensitivity of the cemetery site, PAR 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 2017, approximately 3.5 ft. 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 are estimated at 25, primarily based on visual evidence of soil staining and actual totals could fluctuate. On March 4th, Council Member Houston began to notify local clergy and community leaders about the situation.

Together with Council Member Houston's office, PAR plans to issue a media release today, and host a press conference on Tuesday, March 7th. A public meeting will be held on March 25th, with further details to follow. PAR and City staff recognize the sensitivity of this situation and are committed to moving forward in a dignified and respectful manner.

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

CC: Elaine Hart, Interim City Manager
Bert Lumberras, Assistant City Manager
Kimberly McNeeley, Assistant Director, Parks and Recreation Department
Liana Kallivoka, PhD, PE, Assistant Director, Parks and Recreation Department