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**ICCFA Magazine  
author spotlight**

► Ward is a registered landscape architect and president of Grever & Ward, an Orchard Park, New York, firm specializing exclusively in

cemetery design, planning and layout. He has more than 30 years of experience in cemetery-specific planning.

► Grever & Ward has continuously served the cemetery industry since 1939. Each year, they plan 50-75 new cemetery projects and have served more than 4,000 cemeteries throughout the US and Canada. The staff of six is experienced in cemetery master planning, detailed site design, field layout and mapping.

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**CEMETERY DESIGN**

There's so much work involved in running a cemetery on a day-to-day basis, it can be hard to find the time for long-range planning, but it's something you need to do. Here's how to get started.

# How (& why) to get started on a master plan for your cemetery

**M**aster planning, by nature, is a rainy day project. Few argue its importance, but most cemeticians are more consumed by daily operations. Planning is most often done only as needed and to maintain adequate sales inventory. Except in the case of a brand new cemetery, master planning usually falls in the category of "it's the right thing to do" but is not high on anyone's actual to-do list.

The cost of not having a comprehensive plan, however, is paid through lost opportunities and inefficiencies. The resulting losses, financial and other, are very real, even if not always obvious on a day-to-day basis.

## Getting started

As with any larger project, the most difficult part of a master plan is just getting it started. When we have a new request for a cemetery master plan, the first question is often "what kind of master plan?" Although each office has its own way of approaching master plans, the great variety in sites, situations and, especially, the cemetery's expectations alters those standard approaches.

A master plan for a cemetery can cover a site varying in size from more than 100 acres down to less than 5 acres. The only common thread is the need to program the best way to use that undeveloped land.

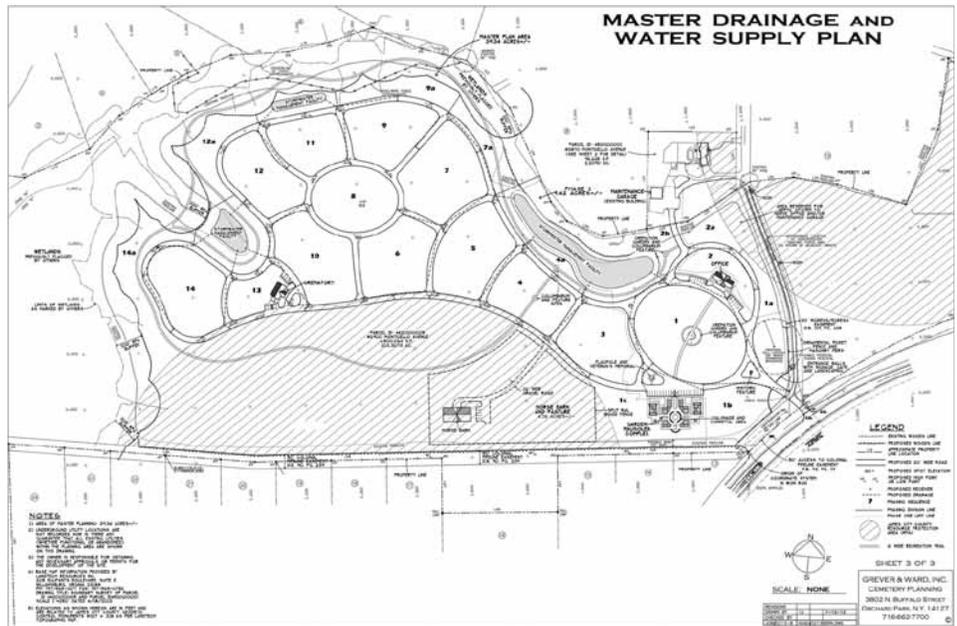
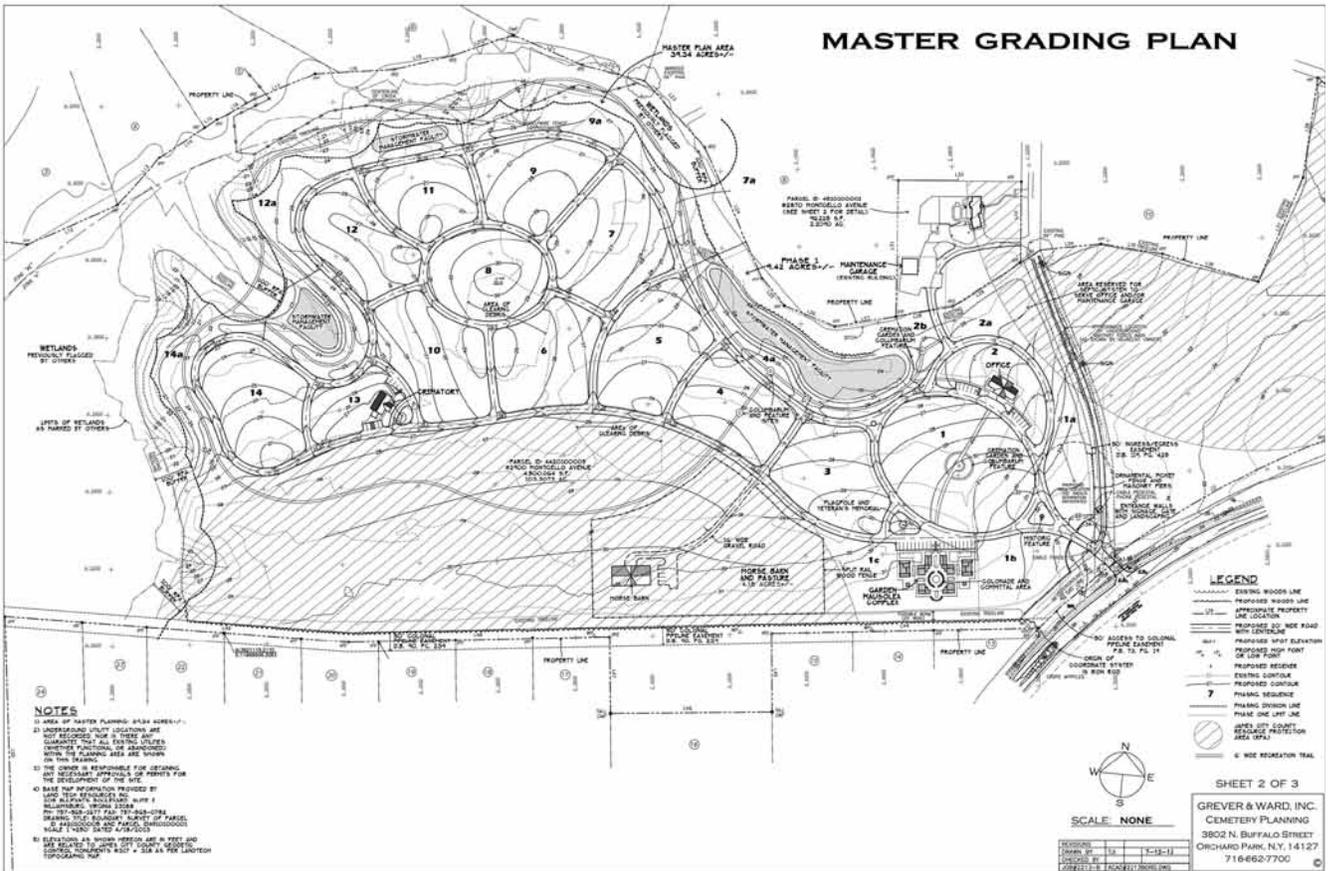
For larger sites, often new cemeteries,

A cemetery master general plan by Grever & Ward covering a site of just under 40 acres shows areas for stormwater management, sites for a crematory, office, columbarium, cremation garden, veterans memorial and garden mausoleum and how the road system would divide the property into burial sections.



## CEMETERY DESIGN

The master grading plan (right) and master drainage and water supply plan (below) for the same property shown in the master plan on page 30 provide a comprehensive look at those specific facets of the overall plan.



the emphasis is primarily on physical site development. Master plans for small sites tend to involve guidance in programming specific products in response to a known or anticipated market. Intermediate-sized master plans may address both.

To get started with a master plan, cemetery managers should be aware of a few realities:

- A master plan is valuable when dealing with any stage of property life—a totally new cemetery, one halfway through its usable land or one with very little land left.

- To remain valid over time, a master plan must be grounded on basic physical relationships—topography, drainage patterns, soils, physical access and aesthetics, to name a few.

- A master plan is intended to be an evolving living document that responds to changing markets and priorities.

- Master plans usually have multiple audiences. They are the most public planning document for a cemetery. They may be used for communicating your vision to regulatory agencies, municipalities, the surrounding community and the public, via marketing. These uses are in addition to the core purpose

of setting goals for the cemetery and maintaining those goals through the years and through future administrations.

### What a master plan is and does

Two of the more common misunderstandings about the purpose of a master plan are that they are used directly for construction or that they depict every future interment site for the property

covered by the plan.

A master plan that is physically well grounded provides an excellent framework for individual expansions and construction, but the level of detail is not sufficient for getting permits and approvals, or for communicating clearly to site contractors.

With that said, one area of beneficial overlap between master plans and site development plans is the ability to set

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phased project limits, quantify construction items and prepare preliminary cost estimates for the next expansion.

This gives cemetery leadership a reliable prediction of where the next development should occur, what it will cost and what it will produce in terms of interment space. The same qualities that enable this prediction also result in more seamless and less expensive future expansions.

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The physical format of a cemetery master plan will vary, based on the planning office’s preferences, the size and type of planning site and the specific needs and objectives of the cemetery.

On larger sites, new cemeteries or those with larger land reserves, a common format used in our office includes a number of interrelated studies and plan sheets that may include the following comprehensive studies:

- General plans, providing the layout of roads, entrances, building locations, special area features, development phases with projected interment sites and “macro” landscaping (tree patterns, buffers, etc.).
- Grading plans, proposing finished future contouring that will promote attractive, elevated sections, good operating slopes for equipment, positive stormwater runoff and accommodation of ongoing grave excavation and soil disposal.
- Drainage and utility plans, addressing needs for stormwater collection/detention, subsurface drainage of soils (perforated

subdrains) where necessary and water supply or any other utility needed to serve the property now and in the future. Details of these drainage and utility features are limited to only what is needed to assure function and avoid expensive upgrades in the future due to undersizing.

- Plan report and cost opinions, justifying and explaining design decisions and narrating any future considerations or issues that cannot be easily expressed on the plans.

Master plans, again, are meant to be flexible and revisable, but changes should not be made arbitrarily. Future administrators need to fully understand the rationale that shaped the original document before deciding that those factors have changed or that revisions are warranted.

Cost opinions for site development are extremely valuable for fixing construction budgets and helping cemeteries set product prices that are reality-based.

### The basic beginning steps

The idea of initiating development of a cemetery master plan can seem daunting and intimidating, but it shouldn’t be. Three basic steps are usually required of the cemetery. They are:

- 1. Select a planning firm** based on cemetery experience and knowledge. Local planning offices often will have an important role in the cemetery’s development, especially as an interface with the local permitting and approval process in the middle part of the development process. Most such local firms, however, have very limited, if any, cemetery-specific experience.

In the early (master plan) stages and the later (interment space planning) stages, intimate knowledge of how cemeteries operate day-to-day and of current general cemetery trends and markets are essential.

The role of local professionals—addressing local or regional requirements—typically occurs in the mid-stages of the development process. It is crucial,

however, that they collaborate with the cemetery specialists along the way. Traditional approaches to planning don’t always translate well to cemeteries.

- 2. Obtain accurate up-to-date site information**, with the assistance of the planner. Typical needs are for the cemetery’s boundary (property line) mapping, existing terrain and limits of development (topographic mapping) and any easements, rights-of-way or other land use restrictions, including zoning requirements. Soils information is critical, but it can be gathered later, during the early planning process.

- 3. Prepare a list of needs**, including:
  - a. A list of specific, ongoing issues, problems and limitations that the cemetery may be struggling with. For example, relationships with neighboring properties and the community.

- b. A profile of sales, ideally going back five years or more, should be compiled.

- c. A wish list of new products that haven’t been offered previously but may be needed in the future. Ideas can come from requests made by families, products seen in industry publications or at trade shows and offerings by competitors.

- d. A vision of where the cemetery needs to go, in terms of property identity and image. In many cases, this is simply a return to the cemetery’s founding concept.

With these basics, a master planning effort can begin. It is a process that never completely ends or stagnates. Periodic revisiting of the master plan every five to 10 years (or sooner, if conditions change) will keep it relevant. Those updates are typically minor compared to the original planning effort.

Developing a master plan can seem like an imposing task, but the first steps in the effort don’t need to be. In the end, your master plan will be tailored to the cemetery’s needs and your vision. The result will help the cemetery’s managers face the future with assurance and a new sense of direction. 