



The Economy of a Good Plan

At a time when most businesses are looking for greater efficiency in their operations, many cemeteries are following suit. Unnecessary costs are being targeted and belts tightened. When the basic needs of cemetery operation are considered, long-range planning and aesthetics are not always on that list. In the most successful cemeteries, they are at the top.

Many cemetery caretakers speak of landscaping as a major source of problems. In some cases, it has been to the point of wanting to eliminate all trees and landscaping from new developments. In most of those situations, there is a rational basis for it. Randomly placed trees that are oversized and messy and lot owner plantings that fly in the face of regulations add up to a bad experience. The conclusion that landscaping is the enemy is a simple reaction but misguided.

What is often overlooked is that aside from physical location, one of

the primary reasons a lot owner chooses a cemetery is for the beauty of the landscape. Remove that, and what is left is an environment that offers interment space but little else for the true customers: the visitors who follow later.

Grounds managers have a difficult charge in keeping the cemetery manicured and functional with a maze of obstacles and, often, a declining staff. The only thing worse is a corresponding decline in sales and value of the interment space. If sales and income suffer, it can create a cycle of decline. The solution has

always been a smarter landscape – coordination of the plantings with the burial space and selection of

the right plants in terms of hardiness, growth rate, ultimate size and neatness.

A coordinated landscape produces clean mowing patterns and fewer backhoe obstacles. Thoughtful planting selections result in less cleanup and greatly reduced (though not eliminated) maintenance. Good design produces optimum conditions for the grounds crew and beauty to promote the property. If done well, the public is more than willing to pay for it. The cost of this careful planning is miniscule compared to the operational savings and improved sales.



Economy through design applies to cemetery infrastructure as well. Master planning is long range and may be seen as expendable in austere times. The reality is that it becomes more valuable than ever in those times. Greater economy comes through efficient land use, which results from looking not just at the next expansion but at the ultimate “build-out,” including the last expansion.

A hundred feet of cemetery road can cost \$10,000 to \$20,000, including its pavement, drainage structures, water supply and other systems. Too little roadway can produce years of inconvenience, lawn damage and poor operating conditions. Too much roadway is a drain on development funds. Because all situations and sites are different, there is no one correct answer. Road design responds to landform, soils, local climate and regional practices. A long-range plan considers all of these.

Designing utilities is a one-time effort if it’s done as a system and not as individual add-ons. As a cemetery expands, the demands on its systems

increase. With the use of properly installed modern materials, water lines and drainage pipes should last indefinitely. If they are not sized through a master plan, however, they will require later upgrades with all the expense and disruption that goes with it. Conversely, sizing the systems by “overkill” can result in oversizing, with higher-than-needed costs at the time of installation.

A long-term burden that many cemeteries now face is soil management. Larger properties that are running low on land (typically urban cemeteries) are faced with stockpiling surplus soil from daily burial activity. In many cases, they find themselves paying to haul it away. Even with enough land to spread surplus excavation, it is likely that the soil will be moved twice, or will create unnatural landforms that complicate development and waste valuable burial space. Although opportunities to sell surplus soil or to have it hauled at no cost may arise, they are

usually limited in quantity and time. The only long-term solution is coordinated earthwork design that factors in soil accumulation and future land elevations. Excavated soil can then be placed where it will be needed for future development in a single move.

The cost of a quality, reality-based master plan may be pennies per interment space, but it will pay for itself many times over. This fact is often lost because the ultimate savings occur over many years and several administrations. The savings are real but hard to quantify and difficult to track. Solid, comprehensive planning produces an even less tangible result over time: an air of purpose and direction that transcends any one administration. A master plan promotes an image of permanence to the public and becomes a chart of ongoing history for the community.

In the confusing maze of regulations that makes property development

Above (from left to right): 1. The entrance feature at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery in Rochester, N.Y. 2. Aerial photo of New Russia Township Cemetery in Oberlin, Ohio. (Photos courtesy of David Ward)



Above: The greatest economy of all comes through development guided by a coordinated master plan. (Photo courtesy of David Ward)

painful and slow, a master plan shows direction and vision. We now routinely include master plans when we are in early discussions with municipalities or environmental agencies at the start of a new expansion. Years ago, these plans were often considered internal documents to guide the cemetery management. They were rarely shared with outside agencies for fear that the cemetery would be locked into a course of action. Now we find that they are invaluable in reassuring the same agencies that there is forethought and that a cemetery is among the “greenest” of all developments.

These old and newfound benefits of long-range planning should come into focus when there is a need to reduce waste. To many, comprehensive planning that looks ahead 50 years or more may seem extravagant and unnecessary. Those who manage best know that the educated decisions that grow from those plans are critical. •



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