

# Cemetery Expansion Springing Ahead

— by David G. Ward

*With the coldest winter in recent memory behind us, it may be time to look for “green shoots” and set longer-term plans.*



The past few years have been tough for many cemeteries. A combination of a poor economy with reduced sales and services has kept many cemeteries in a “wait-and-see” mode. The necessities of development and expansion have often been delayed, along with the introduction of new options and services.

More recently, our conversations with clients bring more positive reports on cemetery sales and services. With the coldest winter in recent memory behind us, it may be time to look for “green shoots” and set longer-term plans.

At the same time when cemetery expansion may have been postponed, the process of expansion requires much more time than it did in the past. The time needed to physically plan a new addition and the decision times from

cemetery management are not usually the source of this extra time. Longer development schedules stem from more involvement from outside interests; agencies at the town, county or state level have an increasing say in how a new cemetery expansion is planned. Most of this (unsolicited) involvement is for environmentally based programs. National stormwater laws administered locally are the most common of them. Additional local ordinances regarding woodland clearing, steep slope protection, wetland avoidance and buffering are also becoming more routine. These can be even more problematic in terms of delays than the national programs.

These development requirements shouldn't discourage cemeteries from expanding; they just dictate more preparation time. Average timespans

between the initial planning of an expansion to the point where interment can be made has grown from 1-2 years to 3-5 years in little more than a generation. Because cemeteries also tend to expand only every 15 to 20 years, the needed lead time often catches cemetery administrators by surprise.

## The Road to Expansion

While there is no single best approach to all cemetery developments, a series of key steps streamline the process:

### 1. Prepare/Update Your Master Plan

If you've never had a master plan or your current version is showing its age, an up-to-date comprehensive plan is the foundation upon which all future developments rest.

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Knowledge that your expansion fits in an overall framework says that you've done your homework. These impressions are priceless in terms of goodwill and cooperative spirit.

**A master plan's importance can't be overstated.** No land use is longer in term than a cemetery, and good planning decisions will pay off throughout its lifespan.

If the master plan is based on sound, physical realities, the benefits include long-term economy, efficiency and beauty. The programming of interment options and marketing are an important part of a master plan, but they are the factors that change over time. Basic studies including road access, earthwork dynamics, drainage systems and aesthetics are the elements that will endure if done right. Development cost analysis is a byproduct of this and helps establish the preliminary budget for your upcoming expansion.

These are the internal benefits of a cemetery master plan. With the great increase of outside interests in land development, master plans have become even more critical as an external tool of reassurance.

Reviewing authorities, local or regional, are noticeably more cooperative when they can see what the ultimate "build out" for the property will be. Cemeteries are an unusual land use to most of these parties, but knowledge that your expansion fits in an overall framework says that you've done your homework. These first impressions are

priceless in terms of goodwill and cooperative spirit.

Along with official agency interests, your residential neighbors and surrounding community may have a more personal interest in your development plans, positive or negative. It's easy to say that it's "none of their business," but town boards respond to their constituents, especially the vocal complainers. This doesn't necessarily mean that officials will agree with neighbors' positions, but they will make sure that you or your consultant address the concerns. A master plan depicts the expected future. It should never be presented to the community as absolute or final, but it does state your intentions and your vision.

## 2. Site Information Collection

Prior to detailed planning, site specific information is gathered for the next phase of development identified in the master plan. Some of the basics include:

- a) topography (contour mapping);
- b) soils descriptions (general information, often available online);
- c) general project limits, including property lines, where applicable;
- d) environmental restrictions (i.e. wetlands), if present;

- e) adjacent development limits (i.e. existing section limits, roads and other infrastructure);
- f) existing features to be preserved and protected (i.e. selected trees);
- g) subsurface investigation (test holes to record groundwater, soil depth to rock, etc.).

Subsurface investigation can be done through soil borings, but our preference for ground burial areas is open test pits. They are usually done with the cemetery's backhoe, then recorded on the topographic mapping. These larger, temporary test holes are usually more revealing than borings. They can be much more useful, as long as the observations are recorded and the holes are accurately located. Side benefits include inexpensive, faster results.

The earlier the site information is collected, the better. It gives the planner all of the insight needed for a well-designed project.

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### 3. Start Informally – Preliminary Plans and Discussions

A good strategy for any new cemetery development is to approach the municipality early on, ready with preliminary plans. Planning boards often have regularly scheduled “work sessions” where you can advise them of your plans and they, in turn, can advise you of what will be expected for the review process and specific documents.

In some cases, the first stop is with a single town agent, typically a planning coordinator or code enforcement officer. Regardless of who the first contact person is, it’s a great way to get accurate information, anticipate needs and establish a rapport with those involved with your development.

Commercial developers can be aggressive in their strategies, especially compared to cemeteries. As a result, some town agents develop a hard exterior for official public meetings. An off-the-record, conversational meeting beforehand can make a big difference. In most cases, it’s their first encounter with a

cemetery, and it becomes a learning experience for them, as much as for the cemetery.

### 4. Site Planning

An individual cemetery expansion can vary in size, but a typical development is in the 2 to 3 acre range. First-time developments for a new property are less common but tend to be larger, often 5+ acres. Whatever the size, site plans are often required for submittal and review in the case of expansions, and are virtually always required for brand new cemetery developments. They are the plan documents that prove adherence to any requirements, local or regional. Typically, site plans are multi-sheet packages that include legal descriptions of the ownership, property information, signature lines for all interested departments and all standard details and notes that show compliance with the town’s codes.

For cemeteries, storm water runoff and control of soil erosion during construction are often the key concerns. Review of the site plans is typically done by the

local Planning Board. It may involve earlier reviews by a conservation commission or similar environmental concern. These early reviewing parties generally are serving an advisory role to the Planning or Town Boards.

### 5. Construction Documents – Contract Plans and Specifications

When local approvals are secured, the site plans are the basis of the construction/contract documents. They are supplemented with additional detail and combined with a book of specifications and contract conditions.

These conditions protect the cemetery by spelling out the quality of materials and workmanship, and they include the procedures that are expected for bidding and the administration of the construction contract (recordkeeping, contractor payment requests, etc.). With all of this made clear, bidders submit prices that are all based on the same set of expectations. That, in turn, creates a level playing field and the most competitive pricing for the development work.

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*Seamless transitions between each cemetery expansion are important aesthetics and provide long-term economy.*

The cemetery management knows what it is getting in terms of quality and cost. The final construction package should also include development cost opinions by the planners to compare against the submitted bids.

In a tougher economy and with tighter budgets, construction documents and contractor oversight seem to be side-stepped more often. It seems more common for cemeteries to become comfortable with a given site contractor and leave decisions on materials and changes to the plans up to that person.

The contractor's changes might be well-intended to save short-term costs, but the design life of a cemetery development is far greater than commercial construction. Material selections need to respect that fact. Tight spatial requirements for utilities that maximize burial space may not be obvious to a contractor. The dollars that are lost by departing from the design are many times greater than the perceived savings at the time of construction. Unauthorized departures from the approved site plans can also bring trouble from the Town.

### **6. Section Design and Layout**

The final stage of expansion is the most important one for the cemetery's involvement. Section planning should begin by preparing a specification that

includes preferences on items such as grave dimensions, lot sizes, memorial styles and burial depth, etc.

Cremation areas are becoming a larger part of section planning and are often included as a separate cremation garden area within a section or evenly distributed smaller ground burial plots throughout the new section. Current cremation rates should be factored in, with allowance for inevitable growth in those rates.

Along with planning out burial sites, the section plan serves three related purposes. First, with the basic site construction work completed and lawns established, the section plan is used for the field layout of the new lots. Lot corner markers are set in the ground to ready the section for sales. There are many ways that cemeteries have established lot corners. The most error-free and clear system, in our experience, is with metal corner markers that are numbered in accordance with the plan. The metal markers are able to be found with an inexpensive, simple metal detector if they become covered by turf, soil and snow – a great feature in northern cemeteries.

To be easily detectible, we prefer a composite metal marker – heavy galvanized steel shanks that the metal detectors easily find. The steel also provides the strength to resist breakage from heavy

equipment tires. A cast aluminum head (typically 4" in diameter) includes raised numbers for visual confirmation of the correct lot.

Eventually, after the field layout is completed, the section plan is converted into final sales maps. These maps include any minor field adjustments and graphically show the location of each corner marker as it was set. In the past and in many cemeteries still, the sales maps are prepared at a large scale to allow lot owner names to be written in as the space is sold. The maps are now usually prepared in digital (AutoCAD) format, so they have the ability to be used with the cemetery management software packages that are quickly growing in use.

A last extension of the section plan is for use in landscape planning. Section designs function best when the landscape is integrated with the lot layout. Trees and ornamental plantings have always provided a tremendous boost for lot sales. Landscaping entails some additional maintenance and cost. To minimize those costs and to protect the landscape from damage, the section plan should provide dedicated, permanent locations for the trees and other materials. This feature, combined with the right selection of species, provides the beauty that attracts lot owners at the least expense possible to the cemetery.

Postponed development, combined with a longer process, can put pressure on a cemetery when more interment space is needed. The path to more inventory varies a bit depending on the cemetery's locality, project size and the site itself. The cemetery's expansion should be a fresh, exciting time of possibilities, not surprises and frustration. Tight timelines lead to fewer options, shortcuts and the extra costs that come with both. Adequate time to plan makes the difference.

David Ward is president of Grever and Ward Cemetery Planners. He may be reached at 716.662.7700 or email [info@greverandward.com](mailto:info@greverandward.com).