



The Value of a Cemetery

the virtues of a beautiful cemetery

No one needs to explain the virtues of a beautiful cemetery to the lot owners who have already bought into it. At a recent 100th anniversary celebration of a local cemetery, a nearly one-sided conversation with a lot owner reminded me of this. Standing near her family lot in a well-landscaped section drenched in fall colors, she was effusive in her description of the cemetery's beauty and peacefulness. Unfortunately, if there is no emotional tie to a cemetery or time spent within its gates, individuals and local agencies may not see these true qualities. Their opinions may be guided by stereotypes and simple ignorance. As a cemetery planner with Grever & Ward in Orchard Park, N.Y., I've seen numerous people concerned about cemetery development in their community.

Cemeteries have been a well-kept environmental secret in most communities. As the green movement continues to rise and towns are straining under the onslaught of

commercial development pressure, cemeteries are a breath of fresh air. As towns face the concrete, blacktop, visual clutter and traffic of commercial development, cemeteries are the true girl next door: taken for granted and always there.

Out of the 50 to 75 cemetery development projects that we pursue each year, usually only three to five are brand new cemeteries. The rest are simply ongoing periodic expansions to long-established cemeteries. The public is rarely aware of these routine growth periods. With recent national environmental laws, however, even small cemetery expansions down to an acre in size are subject to local scrutiny. These new realities regularly find us in front of reviewing agencies that usually know nothing about cemeteries. Worse, the past sins of aggressive commercial development can make a town board or commission skeptical of all land development.

In this climate, we find ourselves

having to educate program administrators or, in the case of new cemeteries, multiple review boards and adjacent neighbors on the beauty and community amenities that a cemetery offers.

Some concerns about a new cemetery are thoughtful and worthy of discussion, given that these developments are a rare occurrence. Few towns face a new cemetery proposal more than once, and most never do. The following are six of the most common concerns:

1. Traffic

A major, troublesome side effect of commercial development, traffic congestion is a primary concern of

Right: Wildlife and cemeteries often coexist easily.
Above: Most cemeteries offer a substantial amount of landscaped green space. (Photos courtesy of David G. Ward)



HENDRICKS

COSTELLI

JAMES COSTELLI

AGED 84 YRS.

ELIZABETH

HIS WIFE

AGED 42 YRS.

REST IN PEACE

ELIZABETH

1893

town agencies. This may prompt a requirement for new cemeteries to provide expensive detailed traffic studies. Pointing out that cemetery traffic is limited to sporadic, single-car visits and, at worst, 20- to 50-car processions at the low volume periods of the day (usually between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m.) can often avoid these studies.

2. Visibility

There are some neighbors who think of a graveyard as a spooky and morbid stereotype, which might result in them requesting extensive screening. The counter to this are photos of real cemeteries – richly landscaped, well-maintained and active with caring lot owners and passive recreationists. Occasionally, a determined neighbor, most often young, wealthy and concerned about property values (a reverse stereotype?) will not be swayed. Despite the fact that their property values will probably be enhanced with a cemetery as a neighbor, special provisions for screening may be forced. The cost for these features can be substantial, but the loss of land is even more so. Fortunately, many neighbors welcome a cemetery as a quiet, naturalistic and extremely slow development.

3. Security

The lack of lighting and the remoteness of a cemetery bring some concerns about security at night. While anything is possible, many cemeteries now leave their gates open, allowing occasional police patrols and better security. In the toughest environments, private security and remote monitoring are common. Anything can happen anywhere, but outside of occasional vandalism, it is rare to hear of any major crime event within community cemeteries.

4. Environmental Effect

All development has some effect on the environment. With the possible exception of parkland, no development comes to mind with as little effect as a cemetery.

Cemeteries have a very low

percentage of hard, impervious land cover such as pavements and roof areas that accelerate stormwater runoff resulting in downstream flooding, erosion and higher heat loads in sensitive cold-water streams. Many towns regulate this impervious area for commercial developments at a maximum of 80-85 percent hard surface, with the remaining 15-20 percent as required greenspace. Cemeteries are exactly the opposite – most are 80-90 percent green, with 10-20 percent in pavements and buildings. Who can argue these benefits?

Groundwater pollution is a concern often raised with a new cemetery, but several studies have been done over the years, and none to our knowledge have revealed any concerns in this area. The extensive use of concrete vaults, small quantities of embalming chemicals, their breakdown into organic compounds and the gradual nature of the burial process have been cited as the reasons for this. In comparison, the pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers used extensively in highly manicured landscapes such as golf courses and agriculture have higher potential for concern than any cemetery.

5. Wildlife and Cover Loss

Most people who live next to woodland hate to see it replaced with any development. If it occurs in the back reaches of a cemetery, it is often preserved for many generations. Given the steady, predictable development rates, plus the limited funding and non-taxable status of many cemeteries, there is little market or other pressure to overdevelop. Long-term property maintenance and labor costs are major concerns for all cemeteries, and aggressive development would only add to that. As a result, cemeteries are generally frugal in their development patterns.

In light of these factors, while clearing and expansions are necessary, expansion is a very slow process for most cemeteries. Natural areas are, in effect, preserved for as long as possible, even if environmentalism is not the

primary motive. In some cases, the environment is specifically promoted. Many cemeteries are now incorporating nature trails and inviting public use in areas that can't be developed for regulatory reasons or will not be needed for many years to come. Aside from the community goodwill created by this, the practice also offers the beauty of the property to people who might not otherwise step foot on the grounds.

Even in developed areas, wildlife is a regular part of the cemetery. Cemetery personnel and regular visitors can attest to this. While not quite as diverse as in a totally natural area, wildlife, including a wide variety of birds, deer and small mammals, are often very abundant, especially in older sections.

6. Community

A common argument to discourage a new cemetery is that it is a large-scale waste of land that does not contribute to the town's tax base. In non-profit/tax-exempt cemeteries, the lack of contribution to the tax base is very true. Also true is that a cemetery very rarely asks for tax-supported services. Aside from an occasional police patrol, what services are drawn upon by a cemetery?

It's well known that residential development uses far more tax-based services than it contributes in taxes. With a cemetery, the town residents effectively receive a park or green space that is accessible to all. This community park builds and maintains its own roads, landscapes its grounds and maintains them in perpetuity – all at no cost to the public. What more could taxpayers ask for?

All of these qualities are important to assert now more than ever, as cemeteries continue to serve their communities in the years ahead. At times, it is easy for any cemeterian or industry supplier to overlook these community and environmental benefits. It is important to point them out to others when the opportunity arises. This is in addition to the more often discussed qualities of remembrance, healing, history and community heritage.

The Years Ahead

I recently listened to a proponent of green burial cemeteries at a state cemetery convention. While the practice is interesting to most of us and the speaker was careful to say that he was not "anti-traditional cemetery," he also spent considerable time speaking about the environmental benefits of green burial. Comparisons were made between both types of cemeteries, which included the presence of embalming fluids and metals associated with caskets. While these items are eliminated with green burial, the implication that there is a considerable environmental problem in this area may be all that is needed to invite additional regulation and media scrutiny to all cemeteries.

Choice and options are critical to provide to the public, and green burial cemeteries are one of those choices. Their impact will be determined by tradition and, to a greater extent, by the simple economics of land development and availability. It deserves respect as an alternative. Inadvertently or not, the suggestion that traditional cemeteries are environmentally problematic could provide fuel for unwarranted attacks. What should be contrasted is not the environmental benefit of one type of cemetery over another but the environmental value of all cemeteries over virtually any other land use.

Changing Attitudes

Over the past 25 years or so, we have seen a subtle but promising trend in municipal consideration of new cemeteries. While there are a few stubborn exceptions that are anti-cemetery, many more communities seem to be receptive to their benefits. The planning professions may realize this as a whole, and the towns are certainly being increasingly guided by planning consultants.

Whatever the source of this goodwill, it is encouraging when it shows itself. For two of the new cemeteries that we have planned this year, their towns openly welcomed and encouraged them. Not surprisingly, both are in areas that have been in a

state of commercial sprawl. The cemeteries are seen as a refreshing, green and peaceful alternative.

This new recognition of cemetery virtues is not universal, and it may be fragile. Community involvement and general public education have been used by many forward-thinking cemeteries to strengthen ties and

promote their properties. While important to sales, this outreach may be even more critical in elevating the public image of all cemeteries. •

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