



Your Cemetery's Next Expansion

Lead Time is Priceless!

— by David G. Ward

Cemetery expansion used to be simple. As a non-typical land use, the ongoing development of cemetery land used to fly under the radar with very little interference from the public or surrounding municipality. Those days are over.

When we have discussions about the process of land development with cemeterians in different parts of the country, a common complaint that they express is “This location (fill in the blank) is the worst in getting approvals,

high permit fees and red tape.” The truth is, nearly all parts of the country have onerous development requirements now. Most of these requirements are directed by, or patterned after, federal environmental laws. The state or municipality may administer these programs, but the hoops to be jumped through are now nationally based.

To avoid these time-consuming and expensive land development programs, logic would suggest that a cemetery could plead the case that



Stormwater management requirements continue to grow for cemeteries as do their costs and land area needs.



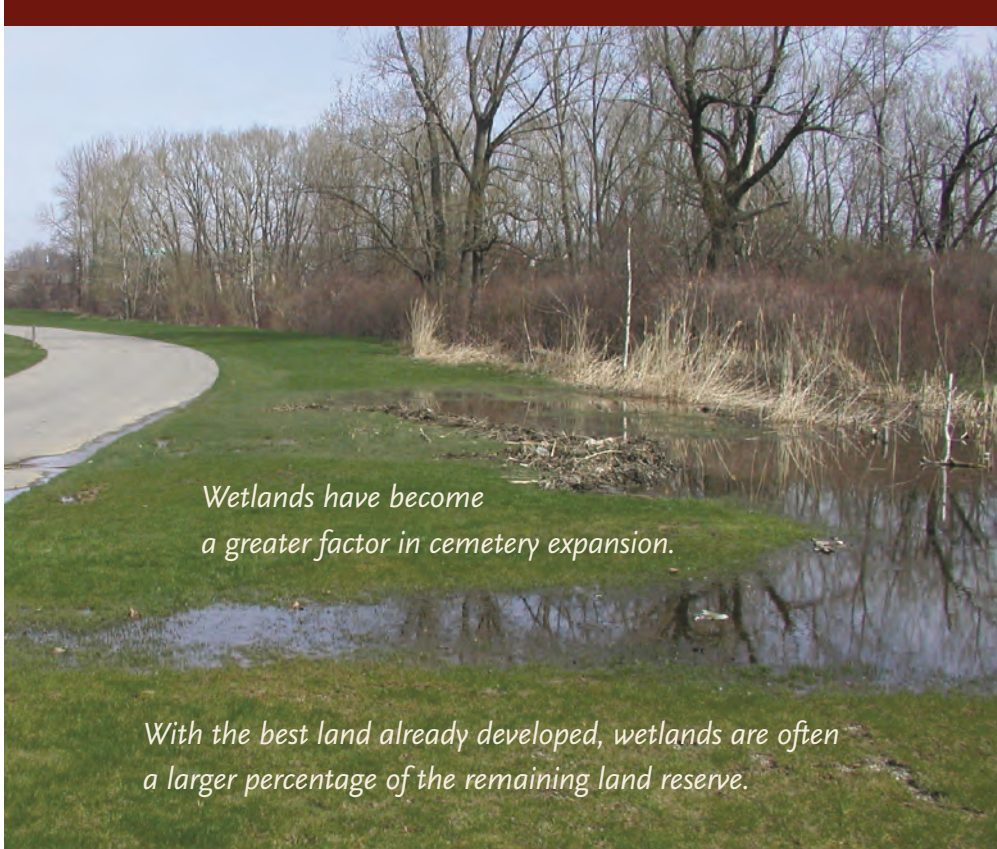
cemeteries are “greener”, more nature-friendly and slower to develop than virtually any other form of

development. Logic usually has no place in the process. I’ve witnessed planning boards try to apply lot-

based fees meant for residential “lots” to cemetery “lots” (fortunately, unsuccessfully). This wasn’t born out of greed for fees, but of ignorance of cemeteries and their operations. It illustrates that **cemeteries don’t fit into standard land development categories.**

Fair or not, ignorance of environmental requirements by the cemeteries is no excuse, and avoidance is very risky. The only rational response is to deal with them head on. The greatest requirement is time and, unfortunately, cemeteries can be notorious for putting development off until the last possible moment. This isn’t necessarily procrastination. With an average expansion cycle of 15-20 years, your last development was more than likely a painless and quick affair. While a lead time of a year or less was enough in the early 1980’s, a period of 3 to 5 years between initial planning and the first sale in a new cemetery

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Wetlands have become a greater factor in cemetery expansion.

With the best land already developed, wetlands are often a larger percentage of the remaining land reserve.



As environmentally friendly as cemeteries may be, they are usually bound to the same development regulations as commercial or industrial land uses.

Cemetery Planning, continued

section is now the norm (if the rules are followed, of course). Delays in cemetery development aren't always due to regulation. Neighbors can be your cemetery's strongest ally or greatest adversary. In some cases, they recognize the many benefits that come with a cemetery neighbor. They can speak favorably at planning board meetings, or at least won't oppose you.

In other situations, neighboring residents come to sense a degree of "ownership by proximity" and feel that your cemetery's wooded acres should remain a preserve or that they should at least have a say in how they are developed. Even without a legal basis, these attitudes may be brought to the town's planning review process and contribute to delays and appeasement.

All of this is not meant to paint a picture of gloom; it is simply the way things are, and they come with clear penalties for non-compliance. What's the answer to minimize those growing pains? Lead time and careful pre-planning.

The dangers of running low on burial space are real. When a cemetery runs out of inventory, there is a short-term, acute impact through the loss of sales.

What's the answer to minimize your cemetery's growing pains? Lead time and careful pre-planning.

The longer-term chronic problem can be worse – the cemetery acquires a reputation for being out of space or limited on selection. It may also be perceived as economically stressed, and the next thing to suffer may be the care of the property. Even when the inventory is restored, there may be a lag in overcoming those perceptions.

On the question of how much time is left before expansion is necessary, most cemeteries can project annual sales rates (not interment rates) by looking back 5-10 years. We all know that sales of burial space can fluctuate considerably year to year, but a longer view back can provide a more reliable projection of when burial space will be depleted. If that projection is less than 5 years, it's time to start early planning.

The next question after projecting inventory is *"How long will it take to ready a new section for sale?"* If the next area is already turfed and supported by existing roads and other facilities, the job is quicker and simpler. The design, layout and landscaping can happen in a year, but two years are better. Trees and other plantings are more attractive and easier to maintain after their stakes are removed and they've had a couple of seasons to take root. This is also a time to generate public interest and pre-sales.



A comprehensive master plan provides precious lead time, efficiency and greater insight moving into a new expansion.

More often, however, a new section involves site construction work – clearing, grading, drainage, water systems, road construction, etc. Current stormwater/erosion control law is usually triggered by land disturbances of an acre and sometimes less. The primary program, National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES), originates from the national Clean Waters Act by the EPA but is often administered by states, and most recently, monitored by towns and cemetery-hired professionals.

It requires compliance with local municipal stormwater programs. Stormwater runoff rates, filtration (water quality) and erosion controls have to be addressed. This process can consume the better part of a year or more, depending on the locality. Add in another season for construction, plus the landscaping and finishing work, and the 3-5 year time frame is understandable.

Another common restriction to cemetery land usage, and one that can add to development timelines, is regulated wetlands. Depending on the location and type of wetland, they may be regulated at the federal, state or local level. Wetlands have become a larger factor for cemeteries in recent years for a number of reasons. Years ago, wet areas were generally avoided by cemeteries because of the higher cost of improvement for those areas. With many cemeteries now moving into dwindling land reserves, there is simply a higher probability that those reserve areas include restricted wetlands.

While there are specific nationwide permits available for use of wetland sites, they are now more restrictive and generally available for very specific activities and very small areas. Unless a wetland area needs to be crossed to gain access to other land, cemeteries are usually better off simply avoiding them altogether. While this sounds simple, the avoidance of wetlands still involves identification of their limits, and that, in turn, requires more time and expense.

In most areas, landowners are required to have wetlands delineated (sampling soils, vegetation identification, etc.) and then located by survey. The work is somewhat seasonal and can easily add several weeks or months to an expansion.

How are cemeteries coping with these delays and dwindling interment reserves?

The shortest answer is more awareness. Awareness of the cemetery's inventory is crucial. Awareness of what will be involved with the expansion (project cost, size, yields, etc.) is every bit as important. That information need only be general, but the viewpoint must be comprehensive – covering the majority, if not all, of the property. It should also address all physical systems – roads, drainage, earthwork, water supply, etc.

The conclusions are expressed in terms of time, costs and yield of interment space. All of these qualities can then be addressed in a single document – a comprehensive cemetery master plan. No cemetery of any size should be without this form of planning guidance.

Given the long-term nature of cemeteries and the need for the long-range information, it's surprising how many cemeteries, mid- and large-sized properties, operate without any master plan.

The information provided by a master plan is critical; it answers:

- Where is the next expansion?
- What will it cost?
- What will it produce?
- How long will it last?
- What resources are needed to get started?
- How soon should we get started?

The answer to the last question may be “NOW!”

All too often, a cemetery's only response to low inventory is to look for small pieces of land to add a handful of graves. In a fully developed cemetery with no more land, this search for space can provide life. In an active cemetery, it produces limited choices and only delays the inevitable. It is a band-aid approach to a larger problem.

There's no going back to the days of quick, simple and inexpensive cemetery expansions. Instead, peace of mind in a highly regulated age comes through longer-range planning and the luxury of time.

David G. Ward is President of Grever & Ward, Inc. and may be contacted at 716.662.7700. Visit their Website at www.greverandward.com.



Space recovery of unneeded roads and leftover spaces can be invaluable in cemeteries with no other land reserves. In those with land reserves, it's only a temporary fix to buy time.