

# CEMETERY MASTER PLANNING

## *Where Do We Start?*

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### The Importance of a Master Plan

Cemeteries are developed unlike most other land uses. While commercial or residential projects are often planned in phases, the completion of those phases usually takes place over a generation or two. Cemeteries, conversely, may progress to a “build-out” over a hundred years or more. This long timeline spans many administrations and often a variety of viewpoints, priorities and visions. In that environment, a master plan is crucial in maintaining a course.

So why do so few cemeteries have a physical master plan? The long-range development of a cemetery offers both a strong reason to master plan as well as a convenient excuse not to. It’s easy to rationalize “we don’t know what cemeteries will be 50 or 100 years from now.”

Public preferences and trends may change what products the cemetery offers but probably not how its land is developed. Cremation rate increases have had a profound effect on cemeteries, yet the basic land use needs are unchanged. The priorities of visitor access, beauty, memorialization and economy/efficiency of land use remain. Messages of faith, hope and love also endure.

Lastly, the earliest “modern” cemeteries of the mid-19th century rural cemetery movement held a basic reverence for nature and the beauty of the landscape. Current movements toward environmentally-sensitive design continue that philosophy. So while much has changed, the basic physical needs and nature of the cemetery remain very much the same.

Another reality that works against the master plan is that it doesn’t produce an immediate result or a finished product to directly generate income. It does, however, produce efficiency, economy, beauty and opportunities that may go unnoticed, and these are every bit as financially important as income-producing designs.

### What a Master Plan Is and Isn’t

The greatest hindrance to cemetery master planning may be its lack of definition. When a cemetery requests a new section plan, cremation garden or short-term expansion, it’s usually pretty clear what is needed. When a master plan is requested, what is expected is not always obvious. To some, it is a long view of land development; to others, it is a varied plan of products, options and offerings. There is no right or wrong definition, but it’s important to clarify your expectations at the outset.

Our own office’s approach to master planning is grounded in physical reality – letting the specific site and its natural systems (terrain, soils, drainage patterns, etc.) guide the design. By working with and not against these natural systems, the end development is almost always more attractive and cost effective. It also endures.

### Getting Started – Step 1: Selecting a Planner

Selection of a cemetery planner is a fundamental first step. The planning professions involved are normally Landscape Architects, Civil Engineers or Architects. There may be a need for all of these in the process of development. Local professionals are essential for later navigation of the town’s site plan approvals, permitting and general interface with agencies. There is a very real value in familiarity with local procedures and personalities.



At the comprehensive master plan stage, however, experience, specifically with cemeteries, is most important. If you find yourself explaining how a cemetery functions daily (or worse, they don't ask), it may be time to look elsewhere. Long-standing road and drainage design standards, for example, don't translate well to cemetery use.

## Getting Started – Step 2: Information Gathering

The start of a comprehensive master plan is one of fact finding. This is a process in gathering physical property information and regulatory constraints. That information is applied as layers of information in a base map for the design to follow. Your planner will assist with this, but some documents may already be on file.

- **Boundaries** – In any planning work, knowing your property limits is important. This may be obvious for boundaries that are fenced, or those along highways. In other situations, especially on steeper sites, the property lines can be complex and have no visual clues.

Broad-brush information on property lines is often available from tax maps found in the town assessor's office or more recently through town or county online GIS mapping. These resources are increasingly accessible to the public. More specific and useful property mapping may be found with the cemetery's deed from its inception. A caution in this source, however, is that it is very common for larger cemeteries to either acquire parcels of land along the way or to sell off perimeter land. These transactions may be buried in your records or, in some cases, lost. If there is any uncertainty, a new property line survey (often called a "metes and bounds" or "outbound" survey) should be commissioned through a licensed surveyor or civil engineering office. A master plan is the ideal time to start with current and accurate boundaries.

- **Soils** – Investigating soil depth, drainage properties, stability for excavation, water table, etc. Sources for this include national soils mapping (originally USDA mapping, now available online) for general guidance. On-site sampling through test holes helps to verify these descriptions and gives a preview of digging conditions.

- **Topography** – Obtaining topographic (contour) mapping to guide road routing, section configuration, drainage patterns, etc. General guidance is available through national (USGS) or local (County or Township GIS) sources. Site-specific topographic mapping is usually necessary for meaningful planning and can be produced through aerial mapping (photogrammetry, LIDAR). On smaller open sites, traditional ground surveys produce the most accurate and detailed base mapping.

- **Utilities** – The most common utilities to be inventoried and expanded are drainage systems and water supply. Information is gathered on-site and the adequacy of the current systems (water pressure, drainage performance) is assessed. For building sites, information on gas, sewer, electric and communication conveyances is essential before moving forward.

- **Land Use Restrictions** – These are primarily based on environmental regulation (i.e. wetlands, water courses and floodplains) and, in rare cases, local ordinances and zoning specific to cemeteries. The best source for information on this is generally township or county offices. In larger towns or municipalities, an early informal meeting with a planning coordinator is the best way to know what the issues are and which other departments will have a say in the planning work. In smaller towns, the municipal engineer may be the best first contact. We have learned that bouncing around to individual departments (i.e. conservation commissions, highway departments, etc.) is less productive, as each office has its own agenda and perspectives.

## Getting Started – Step 3: Develop a List of Needs

This is an opportunity to generate a "wish list" from past deficiencies, chronic problems or opportunities for new facilities and offerings. They may include:

- Specific, ongoing issues, problems and limitations that the cemetery may be struggling with. Some of this may include relationships with neighboring properties and the community. Others may be physical issues, such as poor drainage.

- The need to better meet recent sales trends. A profile of sales, ideally going back 5 years or more, should be compiled. Specific locations in the master plan can then be targeted for these uses.

- A wish list of new products that haven't been offered previously but may be needed in the future. This may originate from past requests, industry publications or competitors.

- Any 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 themes or the dressing up of an entrance for better promotion to passersby.

## Planning Products

The physical format of a cemetery master plan varies, based on the planning office's preferences, the size and type of planning site and the specific cemetery needs and objectives. 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 plans and reports:

- **General Plans** – Provide the layout of roads, entrances, building locations, special area features, development phases with projected interment site totals and "macro" landscaping (tree patterns, buffers, etc.). These land uses are usually tabulated in a plan summary by acreage and percentage of the total land area.

- **Grading Plans** – Propose finished future contouring that will promote attractive, elevated sections, good operating slopes for equipment, positive storm water runoff and accommodation of ongoing grave excavation and soil disposal.

- **Drainage and Utility Plans** - Address 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. Upgrades are often due to the undersizing of pipes or other structures.

- **Plan Report and Cost Opinions** - These justify and explain design decisions and narrate any future considerations or issues that cannot be graphically expressed on the plans. Master plans, again, are meant to be flexible and revisable, but changes should not be arbitrary. Future managers 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 to help in setting product pricing that is reality based. For these reasons, we often express future cost projections in a cost per acre and a cost per interment.

The very term master plan can be daunting, with overtones of a massive, expensive and long undertaking. The reality is that with some very basic property information and a well-considered list of needs and goals, the process begins easily. It should be remembered that a master plan is a living document that should be adjusted over time. This should avoid fears of getting it wrong. An old piece of humor in planning is that "a bad plan is better than no plan". There is a degree of truth to that, but a better perspective is that a master plan can always be improved, and the most important thing is to have a plan.



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1/4" = 1' HORIZONTAL SCALE	1/8" = 1' VERTICAL SCALE
1/8" = 1' HORIZONTAL SCALE	1/16" = 1' VERTICAL SCALE
1/16" = 1' HORIZONTAL SCALE	1/32" = 1' VERTICAL SCALE
1/32" = 1' HORIZONTAL SCALE	1/64" = 1' VERTICAL SCALE

**NOTES**

1) AREA OF MASTER PLANNING: 16.47 ACRES

2) DIMENSIONS OF LOTS LOCATIONS ARE NOT RECORDED, NOR IS THERE ANY SURVEYING DATA TO BE SHOWN WITH THIS SET. THE PLANNING IS ADMINISTERED BY THE PLANNING AREA AND SHOWN ON THIS DRAWING.

3) THE OWNER IS RESPONSIBLE FOR OBTAINING ANY NECESSARY APPROVALS OR PERMITS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SITE.

4) FREQUENCY LINE INDICATION IS APPROXIMATE.

