

Missoula Cemetery Board Meeting
Wednesday, December 18, 2019
2:00pm
Missoula City Cemetery Chapel

Minutes

1. Call to Order

Board members present: Neil Carson, Pat Filicetti, Kim Seeberger

Board members absent: Pat McHugh, Mary Lou Cordis

Staff: Ron Regan, Mary Ellen Stubb

Public: Larry & Will Sloane (LF Sloane Consultants), Dale Bickell (CAO), Jeremy Keene (PW Director), Dennis Bowman (Interim Public Works Director), Ellen Buchanan (MRA Director), Chris Behan (MRA Assistant Director)

2. Missoula Cemetery Strategic Plan Kickoff

Today is to open conversation and kick off a plan for the cemetery's direction and needs going forward. We hope to get everything in the open and on the table now rather than have something hidden that comes up later.

Will Sloane works with historic cemeteries and stated their goal this week was to take an initial look at this cemetery, get a feel for the community, and contextualize the site. This cemetery is beautiful, well run, and a unique green space for the city. Their role is to see how the cemetery can progress to become relevant to meet current society needs and the increased cremation trends. This is a unique green space within the City and once people come here, they see the beauty, the trees, and the nature. The goal is to make this cemetery accessible and relevant to meet the needs of the community and determine where we want it to go. Ron has done a lot here and it is refreshing and nice to see.

Larry added that their goal is to make an action plan that is realistic and workable so it can be implemented. They will review physical, operational, administration, and financial needs of the cemetery. There is a responsibility to look at excess lands to determine liability costs, future use options, and impacts on the cemetery. An aesthetic vision is immediate (barbed wire on Hunton fence) and a long-term vision is the goal. Operationally, this cemetery is city owned and funded by taxpayers, which equals a responsibility to do this planning correctly and use money wisely. Administratively, this operation is in good shape so he can focus on getting other things in place to implement.

There was discussion on the cemetery board's role. No one was quite sure whether the board was advisory or operational. The board does hold a monthly meeting, can engage in issues, and can recommend and approve some items. Larry stated that it sounds like the board monitors the cemetery and acts as a resource to help come to solutions when issues arise.

Larry and Will asked for comments, concerns, and suggestions for them to consider when compiling the Strategic Plan. Items discussed were:

***Excess land** – if we sell or use the land for other purposes, then it may be hard to get it back when the cemetery needs it.

***Bike / walk paths** – make the cemetery into something it is not. People use the streets now for those purposes but putting in additional trails is a concern. (Will noted that balancing the aesthetic and use of this site is important. Most people don't talk or want to see a cemetery until they have to. This is a unique spot with so many angles that we need to get people here. While there can be some negatives, how to get enough people to know we're here and who will then show support by giving money outweighs that concern. Cemeteries are becoming more than cemeteries with arboretums, bird watching, and walking paths as examples.)

***Vandalism / Destruction** - if we allow for unmonitored access and open the cemetery up, then it will bring more people and we will lose the 24/7 ability to monitor the grounds. (Mr. Filicetti suggested more public space might mean more monitoring inherently. Mr. Bowman noted MRA projects have successfully allowed more public access, which has reduced bad behavior.)

Ron said we used to experience vandalism when he first came to work here but once it was no longer put on the news media then it stopped. Once St. Mary's Cemetery stopped advertising it every time they were hit, it stopped for them too.

Will and Larry both said land use is a significant piece of their job. Some cemeteries are removing all fences and opening up access. There has not been an increase to vandalism or destruction because the area has become more active with people using the site.

Larry added that everything in the cemetery is a liability and has an expense. They will look at reducing those liabilities. Sometimes taking down a fence is practical due to the condition of the fence or cost replacement. Pedestrian gates or nature walls are also options.

Will and Larry emphasized that the city should be proud of this cemetery. They looked at the others in the community and this cemetery is the finest facility, although it is in an unusual location. Trees afford opportunities such as a certified arboretum with description signs that would engage the public. There could be the possibility of a partnership with the university. The open areas of the cemetery offer a blank slate that they will make recommendations on how to enhance that side but it can't mirror the old side. They are looking at how to obstruct some views out of the cemetery such as railroad ties. While also enhancing the entryway and frontage road view with ornamental features that draws people to the cemetery. Things are spread out in the cemetery due to the luxury of space, such as the bullpen could be more compact and there is land in excess of burial needs. They see the cremation rate at 75% and going to 85% in the next 15 years or less. Cremations don't need as much real estate and are now the biggest challenge in all cemeteries. Missoula County's annual death rate is 900 with 225 caskets and the rest cremations. Only 15% of those cremations are going into a cemetery. The biggest competition with those statistics is to do nothing. The challenge is to develop new products and services to draw people into the cemetery.

***Green burials** – Larry noted this was a big subject and major cemeteries were trying to piggy-back on this piece of the market. He believes this is really a function of the funeral home, not the

cemetery. A true green burial means leaving the land unmaintained and natural. Cemeteries are an asset to the community and their green space needs repurposed to be more than be just a cemetery. Cemeteries maintain history, memories, and monumental art. The new generation is also getting away from mausoleums and above ground burials.

***Market ideas to bring younger generation into cemetery** – In Larry’s experience, non-profits have offered free placement of cremations, which is working well. Low cost memorial options give families a place to go and see a family member’s name. The need is to build price points that attract people back into the cemetery. We can’t take on the market industry but we have to look at alternatives.

***Relevance** - Will added that people want to be somewhere relevant. The need is to make this cemetery relevant, get people through the gates, and let them realize what a beautiful place this is. Columbariums at churches or universities are gaining popularity because people have ties to the institution. But, Larry noted that when the purpose is changed and the cremations need moved, that is an opportunity for the cemetery to reach out and make a deal to move the cremations here. No one wants to talk about death. We will see more options and places for cremations spring up in the future.

***Public Benefit** - Dale expressed concerned and said that the cemetery needs to demonstrate its public benefit. Others see the cemetery as unfairly competing with the private sector and say that because we’re subsidized we have an unfair advantage. There are a lot of competing resources for limited revenue in the general fund. The question to answer is why the cemetery is important and to demonstrate the value of those reasons to our constituents. Benchmark data with other pure municipal cemeteries is needed to see how we compare. Larry said that information would definitely be provided.

Larry noted that it is unusual for a municipal cemetery to be a financial success. Dale agreed that that goes with everything we do. City operations are a public benefit and the community invests in that. We need to show the value of the cemetery. Jeremy agreed this was a fundamental issue as well as how to define the City’s role in the cemetery now and in the future. Land is big and the future needs decided as to how much land to set aside for the cemetery vs. using for other needs. Larry stated land need is purely mathematical. Re-use is more difficult. Community input will help to generate use options.

***Gravel pit** - Larry used the gravel pit as an example and questioned what the cemetery would do with that. Ron agreed but said this was discussed in the area plan as a land swap. He hopes to know what we need, what we don’t need, and where the best value for the dollar is. The gravel pit will cost a lot of money to reclaim before the cemetery could do anything with it. He questioned if we want to take on that responsibility.

***Land use options** - Jeremy noted there is a long list of short-term options to use the land where it could convert back to cemetery in the future, but he also imagines more permanent uses for the land. Larry noted this is not a unique situation and his job is to evaluate the liabilities. Less land for the

cemetery means reduced liability to the City. Typically, projections longer than two years can be problematic but the cemetery projection shows a very long life.

Chris pointed out that our valley land is limited so we have to find ways to use every piece as efficiently as possible for growth, development, and land use. Will noted this cemetery is a green space buffer amongst development and industry. Making sure there is appropriate investment inside this space while bringing others closer is really important and will make the entire area better and more interesting. A goal would be to find channels for investment in the cemetery to help the cemetery thrive.

***Municipal cemeteries inheriting private cemeteries** - Larry noted that more private cemeteries nationwide are experiencing bankruptcy or abandoning cemeteries. By state laws, cities nationwide are increasingly having to inherit those cemeteries. He expects this to increase with the growth of cremations. A significant issue arises within cities who inherit cemeteries when a cemetery is placed under Public Works or Parks because those departments have no idea what to do with a cemetery. Overall, municipal cemeteries west of the Mississippi tend to be well maintained and managed. Each cemetery is unique and has to be looked at as its own sort of personality. He hasn't figured this cemetery out yet but he has a lot of ideas and good feelings.

***Information gathering process** – Larry and Will plan to work closely with cemetery staff. It is important for cemetery staff to be on board with a plan that they will have to implement. Input from city governing agencies and the cemetery board are important. In early February, the plan is to meet with funeral directors, monument dealers, competitors, and lot owners to gather information from their perspectives. Recommendations may fit within the context of the plan and then be pitched to the public to gather their perspective. At that point, a full draft report will then be presented to the cemetery board for discussion. Larry was hoping to be done by mid-March. It was clarified that a presentation needs made to the Conservation Committee prior to Council as a Whole.

***Renewal districts and growth policies** - Dale wants the plan to draw parallels to the urban renewal districts, growth policy, and strategic framework which are already in place for this area. The goal is to do a better job so that all these plan talk with each other and flow. Will has familiarized himself with the MRA plan and felt talking with the people who formulated this plan would be helpful. He recognizes that a lot of time and energy went into that plan and while there is no intention to recreate the wheel, this time the plan needs looked at from the cemetery perspective. Ellen noted the end plan will change from the original document. Will understands how that works and he asked to sit down with Jeremy in February. Jeremy gave them his card and asked to be contacted in the interim. Jeremy suggested a mini presentation to Council be done in February prior to the final report. Will says talking with more people up front to get ideas brings the best plan.

For Larry, it is important to know who the audience and stakeholders are when preparing this report. However, it is the lot owners and community we provide service to who is at the forefront of this plan. While the city needs to continue funding the cemetery, the cemetery has a core responsibility to get more revenue flow. By doing things well at the cemetery, it will bring in more revenue. He plans to look at employees, and expects the cemetery board to be engaged in this process, and determine the city needs as well. He is less concerned with concerns of private companies.

This sounded good to Jeremy who is taking a hard look at space needs at the Scott Street land along the tracks for yard, vehicles, and office needs. This is an opportunity to share information between that project and cemetery needs. Will said theoretically, other land use means a big revenue base coming to this area. His understanding that, historically, the cemetery board purchased the land and is now looking at cutting back to live within its means should result in benefiting the cemetery when that land is sold. Jeremy agreed that all stakeholders should benefit.

***Partnerships** - Larry believes the cemetery should heavily engage in the community through partnerships with groups like the university to share experience and resources. This is important from a marketing perspective but he knows it can be hard to get organizations to engage in a cemetery. Ellen felt the arboretum was an intriguing concept. She views the cemetery as a sad place to go only at time of death so if we could create an environment that welcomes people at other times it would be great. Chris said the university is a registered arboretum. Paul likes the idea also and feels it would add another layer of public activity to the cemetery. Larry suggested that the university may be able to certify the cemetery which would develop that partnership. If the state certifies this as an arboretum then it can have a big impact of institutional connection with the university. Kids could come out to the cemetery, see signs posted throughout the grounds, and learn about the various tree types in the area. Birding is huge and the fastest growing recreational activities in the U.S. A number of cemeteries are hugely invested in this area.

***Historic value** – Ellen feels this cemetery has a huge amount of history that should be capitalized upon. Paul agrees and Stories and Stones provides a significant opportunity for public outreach. Anybody can come or be a part of this event, which is based on history within the cemetery. The ability to celebrate history is really important to events like this and is also important to the board. Another piece is the eligibility of this cemetery for the National Registry and this should be looked at in the future. This turns the table to apply for granting opportunities or other outside funding sources that the city could use to help fund the cemetery.

***Ordinance** – Paul wants the cemetery ordinance, policies, and revenue issues reviewed and talked about. Larry noted there is unusual detail within the cemetery ordinance. Simplifications could occur but he's not so sure Ron would see eye to eye with all that. Larry prefers to say yes to customers rather than see how many roadblocks can be put in front of the public. Paul noted that the board has tried to navigate around the ordinance through enacting policy. Will understands the detail due to the unusual funeral home setup in this area.

Dale understands the ordinance but we are not opening that up. He advises doing a cost benefit analysis of whether to open the ordinance or not because from his standpoint, opening the ordinance would open a can of worms that the city doesn't want so we have to be careful. Paul doesn't want to re-write the ordinance but suggests there is better language to use and improved ways to address things in the future. Larry agrees a cost benefit is needed before going down that road. Where things are prohibited, he will present alternatives.

Larry plans to present an action plan where things don't have to be done all at once. In other areas, he may suggest a word or two of change within the ordinance that won't clash. Will says they have extensive knowledge in these areas because they also manage cemeteries. In the end, the work of

implementing this plan will fall on Ron and Mary Ellen to do. Reality of a plan falls on personnel so to be fair, we don't want the weight of these ideas to overwhelm staff so that the plan can not be carried out.

Dale asked if they will consider the Diocese as a stakeholder as they are going through the same thing with their cemeteries and are selling off land. Larry said he would be contacting them about their services that might help this cemetery. Larry has asked Ron to request Hunton remove the barbed wire from their fence as that is part of a first impression of the cemetery.

***Monuments** – Paul felt another avenue is how to positively impact maintaining the cemetery, especially monuments when there is no family lineage around any longer. This deals with cleaning, protecting, and maintaining monuments when there is no ability to reach out to family. Larry says that is an issue with 90% of stones today. Monuments belong to the purchaser. This is an area he wants to speak with the city attorney about before making a recommendation.

Larry plans to reach out to schedule the February meeting and to contact Dale and Jeremy to discuss land deals in more detail.

Ron hopes this opens the door to whatever everyone's vision is. The investment here is with the grounds and space needs like if we really need the pit and if it is in our best interest versus something else that helps us like planting trees or improving the entranceway. That has been shared with Larry and Will to see if we enhance the entryway or move it and if that should happen now or later. We told them MRA is a stakeholder with the Scott Street plan. The door is completely open to the best interest of this cemetery. Ron's excited about this. He knows there will be stuff he likes and stuff he might not. Will asked the folks getting ready to leave to reach out to Will and Larry as they think of things to make this plan better.

Dale said Council adopted a parks open space/trails plan that needs considered where they have established a level of service. The cemetery is a sufficient green space as measured within their plan. Ellen clarified the plan calls out undeveloped space, which is not all green space. Chris suggested using part of the cemetery land as a tree nursery to supply the city with trees. He also appreciates the thoughts on how to create a manageable way to celebrate this place. Without the cemetery that belongs to the community and is important to them, that history will get lost. He looks at this project much like the riverfront project where it was a place where no one went until they figured out a way to draw people in and now it is celebrated all the time.

Ellen says when people live around an area, there is always eyes on what's going on which relates to the comments on getting people into the cemetery. Her experience living in the Wilma building when Brennan's wave was built is another example of a rough place that now sees a sea of activity that changed the purpose of the area. The development of the area around McCormick Park is another example. If done right, then improvements create places of celebration.

All city administration left the meeting at this point.

Paul added that Missoula has an aging population that uses and visits the cemetery and right now we don't have a lot of accommodations for them. Garbage cans are heavy, restrooms are adequate, but

there is no ADA accessibility or walkability to move around the grounds. This could be a part of what makes it a better public space in the future. Anything we can do to look at improvements that would help people invest in care for the space. Will says the plan will address ways to interact with this space.

Paul said public use of the grounds is an important talk the board has had and is also important to Gwen Jones who came into early on discussions of a master plan. Her concern was that we needed to have a public element and she mentioned trails in the grounds. We recognize a level of uncaring and lack of decorum where people don't respect the area and its purpose. So, there is a fine line between having those activities and maintaining a respectful environment. As for the metal building, it looked way worse than now. The paint definitely helped. Larry noted he wouldn't have picked that color and that a gray would have blended rather than jumped out.

Chris suggested Larry and Will look at the Ronan cemetery where people celebrate it every day of the year. That cemetery is a unique space where people have lunches and have created a purpose of celebration. Mary Ellen explained that the Ronan cemetery was a field of weeds with no records. She was contacted a number of years ago regarding how we create and maintain our cemetery records and maps. A local funeral director and community volunteers then walked the grounds to map the area and began cleaning it up so there is a vested interest from the community. Will says our cemetery has great records which is not typical in other cemeteries. The records here will help to make their job easier because it gives them a head start with the plan.

Larry says there are programs available intended to educate youth on how to behave in a cemetery and those children will then carry those behaviors forward. Awareness of funeral schedules and timing of programs can all be managed. We have to have more here to draw in the community. We do not need to repurpose the cemetery entirely but provide other purposes.

Will said for years the Wrigley cemetery rules kept people from participating in the cemetery. There is so much nuance in this but it is all about how to engage with people and how to talk with them about a cemetery. For example, how we clean up the ordinance versus how to allow interaction for people. The ordinance can't address every situation. If it tries, then it ties everyone's hands. We have to trust the board, the staff, and the customers until they do something wrong.

Chris suggested maybe hiring someone who can promote those services. Will said the cemetery needs to find another support admin person and they can figure out a way to craft what that second position is and how to get support for it.

Ron agrees the ordinance can be refreshed in spots but we have already taken a lot out of it too. We have had people argue that we have too much in the ordinance but then they come back and understand why we do. He loves decorations but there is a place and time for decorations. If we leave those on the grounds all the time, then he would need to hire more staff just to mow.

Paul says in terms of blending the cemetery, public space, event space, family gathering space we may have a need to look back at models in the 90s of people's perception of a cemetery. There was a

sense of public space beyond just a cemetery. Open land to the back of the cemetery presents ideas for how to create more event space or outdoor gathering spaces for moments of reflection.

Ron suggested a pond with a flooded suction pump that the cemetery could then use to automate a sprinkler system. Water and trees attract people. He attended a wedding at Fort Missoula under their gazebo where blankets were then donated. Would that work on this side of the tracks is a question. Stories and Stones is a good event but it didn't bring more people or revenue to the cemetery. It does do good at public awareness.

Neal is excited to see what Larry and Will come up with to preserve the uniqueness of the cemetery and in a way to be meaningful to the community.

Respectfully submitted by Mary Ellen Stubb, Admin III