

# Metro | *Meeting minutes*

Meeting: Metro Cemetery Advisory Committee  
Date/time: Thursday, February 28, 2013, 9:00 a.m.  
Place: Council Chambers  
Purpose: Quarterly Meeting

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## **Cemetery Advisory Committee Members:**

Verne Duncan, Hannah Allan, Merlene Drapela, Michelle Gregory, Terry McCall, Meg McCauley, Bo Nevue, David Noble, Larry Potter

## **Absent:**

Laurel Smith

## **Metro Staff:**

Councilor Shirley Craddick, Paul Slyman, Rachel Fox, Noel Seats, Emma Williams, Phyllis Cole, Justin Patterson, Monty Woods, Pam Peck, Brian Kennedy, Joel Morton, Michelle Bellia, Kim Palermo

## **Guest:**

Sara Dominguez, City of Oregon City

## **Marketing plan**

EnviroMedia presented the marketing plan for Metro's cemeteries. There was a comment regarding the euphemistic term "passing" instead of "dying," and that with the edgy quality of the target audience named in the marketing plan, maybe a change in terminology would be appropriate.

The Committee accepted the plan.

## **Metro cemeteries cleanup project**

The project was recapped to date. Justin Patterson noted that letters are being sent to families with out of compliance graves, appropriate mature landscape is being retained, families are being given the option to remove new plantings, and planning for future benches and trees is in place. He thanked the Committee for these suggestions.

A third round of letters will be sent March 7, 2013. The final three cemeteries will present additional issues, and will be addressed last.

There was a concern from the committee of the possible inconsistency between the cleanup project communications and the cultural sensitivity stated in the marketing plan. Emma Williams noted that all families have been open to the process once the reasoning has been explained.

Rachel Fox added that people are free to honor their loved ones, but that items cannot remain for an extended period of time. There are provisions in the Metro Code for requests for exceptions to the headstones policy. The cleanup communications refers to the overall look and feel of the properties to keep them safe and clean for everyone to enjoy.

Over the next several weeks the wording of the rules and regulations document will be finalized and then translated into Spanish, Mandarin and Russian.

There were no questions for the Committee.

### **Financials**

Rachel Fox gave an overview of revenues and expenditures.

Expenditures for FY 2012-13 are budgeted at \$744,841 staff will make a reduction for FY 2013-14 by \$84,000 as many projects such as records software and business planning have cycled off.

Revenues have seen a steep decline from June 2010 until present. This is due to the suspension of sales at Lone Fir Cemetery and Multnomah Park Cemetery. Lone Fir suspended sales in 2009, at that time it was averaging \$45,000 in sales annually. Since then it has lost \$42,000 annually. Multnomah Park Cemetery's highest years were 2010 with \$69,000 in sales and in 2011, the year sales were suspended, \$91,600 in sales. Sales then plummeted.

It was noted that the reduction of revenue is multi-faceted. Suspending sales at a community cemetery poses an entirely different set of challenges as customers tend to direct their business to the next closest option, which may not be a Metro cemetery. After many years of staff being focused on project to overcome operational challenges Metro is now in a better situation to plan and create cremation areas to expand sales opportunities in its cemeteries.

The Committee strongly supported staff to continue to plan and create additional cremation and burial areas and to also explore Metro becoming licensed to sell products and services "pre-need." Brian Kennedy added that the cemetery program is in the general fund, and the objective is to generate as much money as possible to keep the fund flat. It was suggested that of the four revenue streams available, (sale of interment rights charges for opening and closing, burial containers and grave markers) emphasis on the last two would be desirable.

### **Records Software**

Brian Kennedy shared information about the records management software project, which will move the program away from its current paper-based system. The new system will track revenue streams, and should improve standard business procedures, including the ability of staff to retrieve information. The new vendor, Stone Orchards Software of Canada, is currently migrating the data, and training for staff is expected to take place the end of April. The cost of the project is approximately \$50,000. He said that when the entire system is firmly in place Metro will explore options to address genealogy requests.

The Committee accepted the plan.

### **Interment right reclamation**

Kim Palermo, legal assistant with the Office of Metro Attorney gave an overview of the history of resold interment rights in Metro Cemeteries. In the past, many families would buy a lot, (usually six grave sites), but many families chose not use all of the graves. It was not uncommon for families to leave the area or otherwise disappear from the cemetery records. In the 1970's, when Multnomah County managed the cemeteries, an assumption was made that these unused graves could be considered abandoned and thus available to be sold to modern families. Metro has developed a timeline to remedy the results of this mistaken decision. The motivation is to do the right thing; to accept the mistake and move forward. Metro does not intend to conduct disinterments; alternate

sites will be made offered if needed. The process for publicizing this process was discussed. The Committee recommended featuring a news story as one positive approach.

Paul Slyman added that it was former Metro Councilor Carl Hosticka who suggested an administrative approach to resolving this problem, and Metro will be the first cemetery to use the new law.

The Cemetery Association of Oregon supported the legislation because they knew there were many spaces that could be used if reclaimed, instead of using new land. Paul Slyman added that the new ruling is an option that may be used, but does not have to be.

The Committee accepted the plan.

### **General feedback and advice**

It was suggested that students be utilized as amplifiers, and Emma Williams remarked that as a recent Mortuary Program graduate she had spoken with Terri Canfield at MHCC and that more cemetery information is being added in to the program.

The importance of reinforcing the marketing messages at the sites was emphasized.

Chair Verne Duncan officially noted three concerns that arose during the meeting:

1. Use of the word "passing" instead of "death;"
2. Revised rules may be in conflict with the stated "unique" and "culturally sensitive" language in the marketing plan;
3. The need to increase investments for cremation options.

Rachel responded to an inquiry that \$20,000 is budgeted for next year's marketing, and that the current plan EnviroMedia presented cost \$12,000.

### **Next steps**

Hannah Allen of the Oregon Historical Society volunteered to help locate descendants for the interment rights reclamation project.

### **Decisions**

Michelle Gregory moved that the marketing plan and interment right reclamation plan be accepted and go forward, Verne Duncan seconded it, and official approval on both issues was granted.

### **Next meeting**

The next meeting will be in June, and could include a visit to the Lone Fir Cremation Garden, which should be nearing completion at this time.

The meeting adjourned at 11:01