

Guiding Questions and Vision of the Poulsbo Cemetery

Questions to Consider:

Is it in the city's interest to continue ownership and maintenance of the cemetery?

This question may be surprising, but it is a legitimate one to ask. The cemetery still has substantial capacity for future burials. There may be an operator of other cemeteries in Kitsap County that would be willing to purchase the city cemetery and take over responsibilities for care of gravesites already used, while marketing unused cemetery lots under the endowment care model. This would ensure continued maintenance of the existing gravesites while shifting administrative and maintenance responsibilities (and costs) from the city to the private sector and would also likely result in site improvements to enhance marketability.

The improvement project committee does not recommend this course of action. It is an option to consider, but may be difficult in practice to accomplish. If done, there are also impacts to the city, citizens, and families of the interred. For example, one unwritten objective for the city-owned cemetery is to offer burial lots at an affordable price. If the cemetery were transferred to private ownership, the cost of purchasing a burial lot would certainly be increased many times beyond the current low price.

What is the purpose of the cemetery?

The current cemetery ordinance states simply that the City of Poulsbo is to maintain the cemetery "as a permanent public burial ground." This may seem self-evident, but what ARE expectations for the existence and use of the cemetery?

Certainly, during funerals or graveside services, the expectation is that the mourners will not be disturbed by other activity in the cemetery.

The current ordinance also appears to consider the cemetery to be a place of quiet and circumspect behavior:

"...to ensure that use of the cemetery property is orderly..." (Ordinance No. 2006-15 Preface)

"...to be used for the interment of human remains..." (2.76.020, Item K)

"Cemetery staff are authorized to enforce all rules and regulations and to exclude from the cemetery any person violating the same." (2.76.050)

"Visitors and the public are invited to utilize the cemetery in a manner consistent with its purpose as a place of interment and as a memorial." (2.76.070)

"No vehicle shall be operated in any part of the cemetery except on the driveways/roads laid out for that purpose. No vehicle shall be operated in the cemetery at a speed exceeding ten (10) miles per hour." (2.76.080)

"No person shall handle, climb upon, deface, damage or otherwise mistreat grave markers." (Item A, 2.76.090 - Cemetery Rules of Conduct)

“No person shall move, repair, or otherwise alter any grave marker without the prior consent of the cemetery caretaker.” (Item B, 2.76.090 - Cemetery Rules of Conduct)

“No person shall write upon, deface or damage any fence or other structures within the cemetery.” (Item C, 2.76.090 - Cemetery Rules of Conduct)

“No person shall litter upon the cemetery premises, including... the discarding of wilted or dead flowers and any other refuse on drives, paths, or the grounds.” (Item D, 2.76.090 - Cemetery Rules of Conduct)

“...no person shall pick any flower, or break or remove any tree or plant or any part of any tree or plant.” (Item E, 2.76.090 - Cemetery Rules of Conduct)

“No animals shall be allowed in the cemetery except service animals that are trained to perform tasks for people with disabilities.” (Item F, 2.76.090 - Cemetery Rules of Conduct)

Should the cemetery be used in ways that don't fit traditional concepts?

It turns out that the cemetery is actually being used by city residents for other purposes. The contractor who excavates graves for funeral directors noted that he has often encountered children playing in the cemetery -- not engaged in vandalism but simply playing games. Others have noted that city residents sometimes include a loop through the cemetery lanes as part of their daily walk or jogging routine. These are not defined in the ordinance's purpose for the cemetery but are part of its daily use.

The project committee considered ideas that would include non-traditional uses for the cemetery, including designation as a historical landmark and heritage park, or allowing city residents to include their dogs in their walks along the cemetery lanes or opening the cemetery up to more recreational uses. Here are related questions and thoughts:

Should the historical aspect of the cemetery be highlighted?

The cemetery holds relics of the city's past. Tombstones and monuments provide a history of our community, where citizens and students can identify individuals who played important roles in the founding and development of Poulsbo, as well as links to U.S. and world history. In other communities of Washington, cemeteries attract people interested in past events and the lives of those who lived our history. Guides and maps for a history walk through those cemeteries were created and are used by visitors and local residents to connect to the lives of citizens who played important roles in the history of our state. One option is to document, record and create guides to the Poulsbo Cemetery, adding a new function where it serves as a historical landmark or heritage park.

This may even result in the cemetery becoming a local landmark that visitors may desire to visit, drawing additional tourists and serious history buffs. Such an approach for the cemetery may become part of the overall economic development strategy for Poulsbo.

For family members of the interred and the local citizens who have a strong interest in our community's heritage, there are actions that can be done which are helpful to those engaged in genealogical research and local history education, such as GPS mapping, photography of every monument, all matched with biographies compiled by the Poulsbo Historical Society and

provided on a website with locator maps of graves. To take it a step further, creation of a historical walk brochure and map would encourage local residents and visitors to explore the cemetery, creating a bond with this city-owned landmark and perhaps feel moved to contribute to its upkeep or donate time for improvement projects. Bridging the heritage of the early 20th Century to the technology of the 21st Century, use of QR code symbols could make it possible for a cemetery visitor with a cell phone to scan or photograph the QR code and then see on their handheld device a photo of the deceased and a biography. These ideas would best be accomplished by volunteer groups, not the city, but could be part of an overall effort to include the historical/heritage aspect into the purpose of the cemetery.

Can recreational activities take place at the cemetery?

The cemetery resembles a park-like open space. There are lanes to walk or jog upon, benches to sit and read, water and trash cans, trees with shade, and almost no vehicle traffic. Should it be more like a park, with a recreational aspect to it? It appears that some informal recreation takes place there already. The lower section of the cemetery is a flat open area, not yet released for sale of burial lots. With proper scheduling to avoid conflicts with funerals or memorial services, this lower section could be used for recreational activities without intruding on gravesites.

If recreational activities are to be permitted, several other questions follow:

Which activities would be appropriate to the cemetery? For example: walking, jogging, dog walking, ball playing, picnics, dances, festivals? Where is the limit?

What amenities need to be in place for a more recreational focus? Trees, grass, benches, water, trash cans, paved trails are already there. Would lighting and electrical outlets be necessary?

If the cemetery is to be used for more recreational purposes, should the Parks Department and Parks Commission administer it instead of Public Works Department?

There are adjacent properties to the cemetery that could be purchased and converted into a park. By siting a park alongside the cemetery, open public space would be multiplied. Some appropriate recreational activities in the adjacent park could be approved for spillover into the cemetery. The use of the adjacent property as a scatter park (for cremains) would intertwine the cemetery and recreational aspects (Note however, that the Cemetery Ordinance [PMC Chapter 2.76.130] currently prohibits expansion of any cemeteries within the City of Poulsbo).

Finally, when considering this option, one has to ask if the public and family members of the interred consider the cemetery to be a spiritual, hallowed place, where recreation of any kind is inappropriate?

The 2016-2017 cemetery improvement project committee makes no particular recommendation on this recreation question, as it was not explored to the point to reach consensus. But it recommends the city council consider this policy question before settling on updates to the cemetery ordinance or approval of a cemetery comprehensive plan.

Should the undeveloped lower section of the cemetery be administered to a different plan than the uphill slope blocks?

The lower flat section of the cemetery has not yet been released for sale or used for gravesites. Should that section of the cemetery be administered differently going forward?

Because it is a “blank slate,” the lower flat area may provide an opportunity to create a more visually appealing face to the public, as it is also next to Caldart Avenue and the cemetery entrance gateway. In the past, estimates for providing summertime water spray irrigation for the entire cemetery were considered cost prohibitive. However, for the flat section, green grass year-round may be within reach.

By not allowing in this low section any lot borders, by keeping monuments/markers flush at ground level, and not allowing planting of shrubs, trees, live flowers, the ease of landscaping & maintenance is improved.

Gravesite decorations, the planting of shrubs and trees, the placement of boxes, shelves, toys, metal designs, ornaments, chairs, settees, glass, wood, or iron cases are all currently allowed by the cemetery ordinance (with consent of the city Public Works Director and his designees). There exists an opportunity now to designate the lower section as falling under different restrictions which would prohibit all those items in order to maintain a smooth, flat grassy area of graves that would be much easier to keep green and maintain.

If this area is to be administered under different rules, other things must be considered. Would these lots be sold at different purchase prices? Could a columbarium be built in the center, to maximize spaces (both cremains gravesites and wall niches) for cremated remains? Adjacent to the visualized columbarium, is there room in this section to construct a shelter structure for funerals and ceremonies, which could be built through contributions and donated labor & materials?

A comprehensive plan for the cemetery would be valuable after questions like this are answered by city policy makers. It would guide future projects, provide goals for volunteer groups and city staff, and enable the orderly development of the remaining space within the cemetery.

Should taxpayers who have no family members interred there be expected to shoulder more of the cost to maintain and improve the cemetery?

Although family members of the deceased interred at the cemetery are always interested in improvements there, the average citizen seems to have little concern about the cemetery. This is understandable; there are other pressing concerns that demand use of scarce tax monies, such as police protection, safe sidewalks, parks, smooth neighborhood streets, and so on.

Yet like the majority of citizens who do not have school-aged children, but must still pay taxes for the education of the community’s youth, the residents of the City of Poulsbo have an obligation to contribute to the operation and maintenance of all city facilities, including the cemetery. The difficulty for policy makers is determine just how much of city funds should go into cemetery operations and improvements.

It was the consensus of the improvement project committee that the current budget is probably too low, but that volunteers and donations will provide the best way to make the cemetery an improved garden-like area that respects those interred there while also serving as a landmark and open space for city residents.

Before asking taxpayers to shoulder much more for city cemetery expenses, we should first reconsider the rate structure for purchasing burial lots and determine if volunteers could handle some of the routine maintenance, such as mowing and weed whacking designated cemetery blocks. There are several community service organizations that may be willing to tackle maintenance sponsorship for specified cemetery sections, or take on a particular improvement project.

As for the current price for purchasing a cemetery lot, it deserves study. Other councilmembers have recently made the points below:

- While this is not a perpetual care cemetery, there is still a cost to maintain it. That cost is now spread among the taxpayers in Poulsbo and competes for General Fund dollars.
- Considering the last increase in selling price was August 2002, using the BLS CPI Inflation Calculator, the present cost would be \$537.47. So, you are, in a way, giving the current purchasers a gift of the inflationary amount. On the other hand, how was the 2002 cost determined in the first place?

Should expectations for care of monuments and grave plots be shifted to the city?

Established nearly a century ago, care of plots in the cemetery was expected to be done by local families of the deceased. In the 21st Century, many of those descendants are now living far away. Other family members have no idea that the city ordinance expects them to provide upkeep of the gravesites and monuments. Should the city amend the cemetery ordinance to assume all care of graves after a defined time period? Some are now over a century old. That sounds like a good starting point. Perhaps after 50 years? Thirty years? It is worth considering, because some graves are neglected with neither the city nor family members attending to tilted monuments or other problems.

A Proposed Vision for the Cemetery

The policymakers of the city council are encouraged to consider adopting a vision for the cemetery. Here's one proposal by the Friends of the Poulsbo Cemetery that could serve as a vision for the cemetery. It is but one version of what could be. It is a good starting point for discussion:

Proposed Vision

A respectful site which serves not only as a final resting place, but also as an open air historical space celebrating Poulsbo heritage. Successful accomplishment of the mission will provide the community with:

- A haven for reflection and remembrance
- A welcoming park-like setting
- A tangible link between Poulsbo past, present, and future
- An educational site where all generations may learn more about families and people who helped shape Poulsbo,

- A peaceful, timeless, contemplative respite from the rigors of daily living,
- A place to commemorate the lives and service of members of the Poulsbo community
- Opportunities for individuals and organizations to engage in activities honoring this site and the people interred here,
- An organization structure and funding mechanism to accomplish the mission and vision, and
- A broader public awareness of this community asset.