

August 23, 2017

From: Councilmember Kenneth Thomas

To: Mayor Becky Erickson  
Public Works Committee of Poulsbo City Council

Subj: REPORT ON CEMETERY IMPROVEMENT FOCUS EFFORT (2016-2017):  
OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. INTRODUCTION. This enclosure to the report contains observations and recommendations on various aspects relating to the Poulsbo Cemetery. Each item will note an observation and be followed by a recommendation.

2. IMPROVEMENT COORDINATION AND PLANNING.

Observation:

The cemetery is just one of many facilities and responsibilities of the City of Poulsbo. A review of records shows that the condition of the cemetery and efforts for improvement have had sporadic focus over the past century. Some have suggested establishment of a cemetery commission to advise the city and coordinate operations, fund raising and improvements, but it has been the intent of our focus to avoid increasing city administrative structures. Rather, the intent has been on finding ways to encourage community involvement in the maintenance and improvement of the cemetery.

Recommendations:

- a. Involve community service groups in the vision creation and planning for the cemetery. There is a great deal of volunteer talent that has been helpful in efforts so far, and can be useful for continued improvements.
- b. Encourage formation of one central volunteer group that can assist the city with planning, fund-raising, recruitment and coordination of volunteers, and liaison with other community service groups to assist in improvements to the cemetery. At present the Friends of the Poulsbo Cemetery Steering Committee is in the process of officially forming such an organization. It is recommended that the City encourage their efforts and coordinate with them.
- c. Adopting a vision and creating an illustrated comprehensive plan for the cemetery will provide a guidebook for future improvements and reference for routine operations, in addition to the city ordinance. Currently, creation of such a plan would require more staff involvement than desired, serving as a diversion of planning and public works staff from higher priority projects. The Friends of the Poulsbo Cemetery group has volunteered to draft a plan for city consideration. It is recommended to provide input to this group and allow them to submit a proposed plan that can then be reviewed and revised, if needed.

- d. To keep city council involved in the operations and improvement efforts, it is recommended that an annual report presentation to the council on the cemetery be scheduled on an appropriate date, with particular comment made on maintenance & operations budget, volunteer hours, and status of any improvement projects by city staff or citizen volunteers.

### 3. INVOLVEMENT OF CITIZENS.

#### Observation:

The families and friends of the deceased who are interred at the cemetery have a connection to the place, and often visit. They occasionally contact the city to express their opinion of the cemetery condition or to suggest changes. However, the average resident of the city simply drives by (some are not even aware of the cemetery's existence) Caldart Avenue without giving the cemetery a thought. To maintain and operate the cemetery, tax money from the General Fund is required. Public support for higher expenditures on maintenance is needed if improvement to the appearance of the cemetery (more frequent mowing, tree trimming/removal, weed control, cleanup of branches and leaf litter) is to be done. Opportunities to volunteer for maintenance or improvement projects will be met with willing citizens if they have established a connection.

#### Recommendations:

- a. Continue with improvements to the cemetery entrance area. The cemetery entrance and area nearest Caldart Avenue should be inviting and a pleasant scene, to encourage city residents to venture into the cemetery, to add it to the mental geography of their own community, to become attached to the place so that they care about it. There are several projects already completed but others remain on the list to be done.
- b. Schedule an annual event at the cemetery, where the general public is invited. The exact nature of the event can be determined later, but a heritage or historical tour might fit the bill. The main point is to provide a reason for scout troops, youth groups, community organizations, families, and all other residents to walk the grounds of the cemetery and feel that they are not intruding, that the place is a welcoming park-like area where they can feel comfortable and appreciate the community's heritage.
- c. Schedule an annual cemetery clean-up day, perhaps the day before the annual event. In addition to periodic city maintenance, and ongoing volunteer clean-ups, this annual clean-up would be an open invitation to the entire community to join in with rakes, brooms, trash bags, and other tools. It will make the cemetery sparkle and provides city residents a chance to feel responsible for the cemetery's appearance.
- d. Continue with notices about the opportunity to sponsor a bench in the cemetery. By donating the cost of a bench and affixing a plaque to it, families and other citizens

- will feel more personally connected to the cemetery. Once the benches are all paid off, brick pilasters used on a proposed iron-work boundary fence in the front of the cemetery could also serve as places to affix sponsorship or memorial plaques.
- e. Rely on a stand-alone, non-profit organization to coordinate volunteer work, conduct fundraising, and assist the city with planning and public affairs outreach on cemetery-related happenings. An independent organization can do some things the city cannot do, and there are examples of other such groups in our community (Friends of the Library, for example). Encourage and cooperate in the formation of such a group.

#### 4. A NEW PLAN FOR THE LOWER CEMETERY AREA.

##### Observation:

The lower section of the cemetery, which is the flat area nearest the cemetery entrance and Caldart Avenue, has not yet been released for lot sales or burials. There is still room in the lower section to build some structures. This current absence of graves provides an excellent opportunity to manage this particular section in a different way, one very different from the conventional expectations established when the cemetery was opened in 1911. Some of the difficulties in maintenance of the older sections of the cemetery are due to:

- a. Freestanding monuments
- b. Concrete plot borders
- c. Trees and shrubs
- d. Ornaments and decorations
- e. Permanent vases that extend upwards from the ground and are not flush
- f. Horizontal grave markers that may be parallel to the ground, but are not flush
- g. The considerable expense of installing water irrigation system for the entire cemetery and the additional cost of mowing the grass that receives water during dry periods.

##### Recommendations:

- a. Take time to conceptualize how this flat area can look. For example, a green, open, grassy area that is irrigated (yet affordable) and easy to mow. Amend the cemetery ordinance and create a comprehensive plan that includes special provisions for this area.
- b. Restrict the graves to horizontal markers that are flush to the ground.
- c. Do not permit planting of trees, shrubs, or live flower plants.
- d. Do not allow plot borders.
- e. Strive for uniformity. As military cemeteries show, there is beauty and solemnity in uniform rows of memorial markers. Those that do not want gravesites in this section can still obtain lots among the remaining available ones on the hillside.

- f. Install irrigation sprinklers before burials are permitted, and ensure that grave placement and excavation does not interfere with the buried piping distribution system.
- g. For a vertical feature, consider a two-walled columbarium built and located in this section, with wall niches for urns containing cremains [this also will extend the capacity of the cemetery].
- h. Consider community fund-raising and volunteer labor to construct a covered structure next to the columbarium, for conducting ceremonies and funerals.
- i. Install a flagpole in this section.
- j. Allow a community group to raise funds, commission and install appropriate artwork, such as a statue.
- k. Enclose this section on three sides (the existing cemetery boundary) with a traditional metalwork section fence with brick pilasters (columns). This could be entirely financed and constructed by volunteer groups.

## 5. USE OF CEMETERY FOR RECREATIONAL PURPOSES

### Observation:

The cemetery resembles a park. It has benches, water, trash cans, trees, open space, paved lanes, almost no traffic, grass, and a nice parking lot. Some city residents use it for walks, jogging, sitting on a bench and reading, and children have been observed playing games there. It has been suggested that the cemetery be treated more as a park, with recreational use allowed and even encouraged.

### Recommendations:

- a. Encourage heritage trail use. The memorials and markers constitute an informal open-air historical museum, commemorating the lives of pioneers and other important community members, as well as people less well-known that built and maintained our community. In other Washington cemeteries, local historical societies have cooperated with the cemetery administrators to create maps and brochures that highlight the heritage of former citizens interred in there. We can do the same.
- b. Include the cemetery in information for area visitors, along with other museums and historical structures in Poulsbo. Perhaps work to create an annual event where people visit all of Poulsbo's museums and historical structures, including the cemetery. A bicycle tour that hits all those sites might be an event that attracts visitors. In this way, the cemetery can play a minor but useful role in economic development and tourism.
- c. Several very good suggestions were made by members of the cemetery improvement committee, regarding information systems initiatives. They are detailed in enclosure 1 of this report, so I will not repeat them all here. They will all help in administering records of the cemetery, providing the public information to assist in finding graves of relatives, and link to historical information that highlights

- the community heritage aspect of the cemetery. Those who are interested in genealogical information will also find these initiatives useful.
- d. My personal recommendation is to be careful with recreational activities. Some might be appropriate, others would raise objection. To some people, cemeteries are hallowed ground, spiritual places where worship and prayer take place. Intrusive recreational activities may violate the sacredness the cemetery has in some people's lives.
  - e. Allowing access to the cemetery for dogs and other pets would require a change to the ordinance and may raise objections. Personally, I have no objections to walking your dog up to visit a family's gravesite on the hillside. But I'm aware that to some people, the presence of dogs and certainly the presence of dog waste, will be upsetting in the extreme. Our cemetery improvement committee did not take a stand on this question due to lack of consensus. My advice is to consider allowing pets only after obtaining a solid sense of what the community and family members of the deceased would feel appropriate.
  - f. Although several committee members advocated transferring the responsibility for the cemetery to the Parks & Recreation Department, there was no consensus on this proposal either. My personal advice is to maintain responsibility with the Public Works Department. The Public Works Committee and Community Services Committee may want to consider this proposal and study it, however.

#### 6. ADJUSTMENT OF CEMETERY PLOT SALES PRICES.

##### Observation:

Current prices for sale of plots were set more than ten years ago, with no adjustment for inflation. The income from plot sales is fairly negligible and all goes into the Cemetery Reserve Fund, which grows very slowly and can be depleted rapidly by modest expenditures for improvements. The city's budget for routine maintenance of the cemetery comes from the tax-generated General Fund, not from sales of plots. A look at city records indicates the city tried to compare plot prices in 2003 to the prices of plots in other cemeteries. No recent attempt of comparative pricing has been made, but it would be difficult since most cemeteries in Kitsap County that sell plots are private or foundation owned, with endowment funds to pay for maintenance.

##### Recommendation:

- a. Continue to use the city's General Fund to pay for routine maintenance of the cemetery grounds and consider a slight increase to pay for more work in the lower section.
- b. Use the Cemetery Reserve Fund carefully for specific improvements.
- c. Adjust plot purchase prices at least to the amount calculated by applying CPI/inflation adjustments to the last rate increase. This will help build the Cemetery Reserve Fund.

- d. Compare with other similar cemeteries to determine comparable plot purchase prices, attempting to find other examples that closely match the situation of the Poulsbo Cemetery.
- e. Importantly, through community service organizations, attempt to have groups sponsor sections of the cemetery for cleanup and routine maintenance. This can reduce the need for city work crews and use of taxpayer generated General Fund monies.
- f. Encourage community service groups, families, and individuals to sponsor specific improvement items.