

Cemetery oversight group meets

Panel to create rules for maintaining graveyards

By TERRI SANGINITI, The News Journal
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WILMINGTON -- State Sen. Margaret Rose Henry, D-Wilmington East, doesn't want to reinvent the wheel.

In her quest to secure legislation designed to maintain cemeteries across the state that have become unkempt because of neglect, she said she plans to resurrect a similar proposal submitted by one of her fellow lawmakers six years ago.

Sen. Harris B. McDowell III, D-Wilmington North, sponsored a similar bill in 2001 to establish an Office of Cemetery Oversight to set up regulations for the operation of cemeteries in Delaware.

McDowell's proposed bill, which came in the wake of problems of neglect and mismanagement encountered by families with loved ones buried in Riverview Cemetery, did not pass.

Henry is determined that does not happen again.

Wednesday, a group of nearly two dozen citizens, funeral directors, cemetery operators and legislators met for the first time in an attempt to formulate some uniform regulations for cemeteries in the state.

"There are a lot of cemeteries in the state in trouble," Henry said. "Riverview isn't the only one."

On July 1, the Legislature passed Resolution 11, dictating that a Cemetery Study Committee be appointed to develop recommendations to monitor cemeteries in the state.

Henry heads the new task force, which comprises state Sens. Karen E. Peterson, Gary Simpson, and Harris B. McDowell III; state Reps. Hazel D. Plant, Dennis P. Williams and Helene M. Keeley; Wilmington mayoral designee Romain Alexander, director of the city's Division of Parks and Recreation; funeral directors Charles P. Arcaro and Thomas Trader; Delaware Veterans Memorial Cemetery representative Estelle Tucker; cemetery operators Lee Hagenbach of Gracelawn Memorial Park, Gregg Strom of Henlopen Memorial Park and Mark Christian of Cathedral Cemetery; and Timothy Slavin, of the state Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs.

Henry set a deadline for participants to draft proposed legislation to present to the General Assembly by mid-March.

To accomplish that goal, she organized three sub-groups to work independently on the regulatory, preservation and research aspects of the problem.

"Before June we want to take steps that are meaningful to address the problem," Henry said.

When the proposed legislation is finalized, Henry said, she would seek public comment.

Gregg Strom, of the Delaware First State Cemetery Association, agreed that some oversight is needed, but cautioned it won't come without a price.

"The responsibility of taking care of somebody's mother and father after they die is very hard," Strom said. "It takes a lot of work and costs a lot of money. What do we do with the guys who are trying to do their best?"

In 2001, McDowell issued a 25-page report borrowed heavily from Maryland's existing law aimed at ensuring cemeteries had money for perpetual maintenance.

The plan faced opposition from the cemetery industry because it would have required the state's 200 cemeteries to be licensed and to place \$10,000 in trust in their perpetual care fund.

The next meeting is scheduled for 8 a.m. Dec. 4 in the third-floor meeting room of the Carvel State Building, at 820 N. French St. in Wilmington. The public is invited to attend.

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