

August 14, 2023

To: Salem Cemetery Committee Board Members

Jacob St. Louis, Chair
Anthony O'Donnell
Beth Gerard
Kate Hanson
Phillip Johns

cc: Ray Jodoin, Director of Operations, DPS Salem
Conor Morgan, General Foreperson, Cemetery/Tree Division, DPS Salem
Megan Stott, Ward 6 Councillor, Salem
Patti Kelleher, Preservation Planner, Salem

Re: Master Plan for Greenlawn Cemetery, 2022

Dear Committee Members:

I am writing as a concerned Salem resident and frequent walker in Greenlawn Cemetery ("Greenlawn") about the *Master Plan for Greenlawn 2022* ("the Plan") that was prepared by Martha Lyon Landscape Architecture LLC ("the Consultant").

I have read and re-read the Plan several times as I am sure you also have done. I've attended Cemetery Committee meetings on Zoom over the past 18+ months as my schedule would permit. I may have a schedule conflict for the next meeting on Aug. 15 and I offer my comments below to help the Cemetery Committee ("the Committee") in its discussion and decision-making about actions to take at Greenlawn.

Comments

There are many good, solid recommendations in the Plan. However, with the "Dickson west side chapel slope" on the Committee's Agenda for August 15, 2023 I feel the comments below are most important. Page numbers in parentheses refer to the Plan.

#1. The Committee needs a *clear* Mission and Vision for Greenlawn to provide a strategic focus for decision-making. Without a strategic focus, there is no way to evaluate whether any particular action will help make Greenlawn what we want it to be.

- There is no Mission Statement referenced in the Plan.
- The Vision Statement ("Vision", p.5) is pretty mushy. Ask 10 people what it means...
- For example, what does the phrase "welcoming to all" mean? The Committee has debated who is eligible for burial at Greenlawn (i.e., residency requirements) without any reference to the Vision or Mission. This is a key question as Salem feels it is running out of burial space.
- For example, is the F. Carroll Sargent Arboretum at Greenlawn ("the Arboretum") satisfactorily reflected in the Vision ("A commemorative landscape that preserves the natural world;" – p.5)? What does this mean?

#2. The arboretum aspect of Greenlawn is not sufficiently considered in the Plan's recommendations. Indeed, the Plan describes Greenlawn's primary purpose "to provide interment space for Salem residents." (p. 58), a

potential conflict with the Vision. Certainly, a challenge given the ArbNet accreditation. How to balance cemetery/burial space with the Arboretum? An Arboretum involves not just public enjoyment of trees and shrubs, but also conservation, education, and botanical research¹. Decisions involving burial space, plantings, open space, public use, programming, historical features, cooperation with other botanical organizations, etc. directly affect the Arboretum.

The Plan does not mention that Greenlawn is the *only* accredited Arboretum Cemetery north of Boston, and one of only three city-owned Arboretum Cemeteries in Massachusetts². As such, the Arboretum is a special asset to Salem and to Massachusetts. Some of the tree/plant species in Greenlawn have been identified as rare and of potential interest to the global horticultural community. This distinguishes Greenlawn and *demand*s a duty of care for the Arboretum. Salem could find itself on the map for the wrong reasons if these special horticultural specimens are allowed to (further) deteriorate.

ArbNet accreditation includes contractual requirements for specific planning, development, maintenance, and governance activities for the Arboretum, as well as compliance reporting. Also, the Arboretum's diverse and rare plantings were important in the application for the National Register of Historic Places. These are also reasons why the Arboretum demands a duty of care, and simply adding burial spaces and columbaria walls at Greenlawn wherever they can be fit in is not the answer.

#3. The Plan ignores the historic 1894 Dickson Memorial Chapel ("the Chapel") as a potential *ongoing* source of revenue for Greenlawn, if restored. This, despite describing the Chapel as "one of Greenlawn's most prominent and beloved features", "a cemetery landmark" and "Greenlawn's crown jewel" [pgs. 12, 22 and 26, respectively].

- The Plan does not mention that multiple inquiries are received each month by the Cemetery Office and the Friends of Greenlawn about the availability of the Chapel for uses such as funerals, memorial services, weddings and other events.
- The Plan does not have any illustration of the financial contributions that a restored Chapel could make, nor any emphasis on its historical *contribution* to the town of Salem (i.e., putting Salem on the map for this reason).
- The Plan did not point out that Greenlawn's 2015 Nomination to the National Register of Historic Places by Secretary of State William Galvin described the Chapel as "the most prominent architectural feature in the cemetery".

#4. Installation of *free-standing* columbaria walls, especially on the west slope of the Chapel is, simply, a bad idea. Such walls:

- will alter and destroy the historical landscape (a conflict with the City's goals as expressed in the Plan³);

¹ ArbNet's widely recognized industry accreditation standards include planning, governance, number of species, staff or volunteer support, education & public programming, and tree science & conservation. Source: ArbNet website.

² In addition to Greenlawn, the 2 other city-owned Arboretum Cemeteries in Massachusetts are Island Pond Cemetery in Harwich, and Milton Cemetery in Milton. The other 3 Arboretum Cemeteries in Massachusetts are privately or non-profit owned: Knollwood & Sharon Memorial Park in Canton; Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge; and Newton Cemetery in Newton. Source: ArbNet website.

³ Plan, p.1: "In developing this [the Plan], the City aimed to restore the *character and quality of the historic landscape*, funding this effort, *in part*, through the development and sale of new, sensitively designed interment sites." [emphasis added by MF]

- will detract from the Chapel (Greenlawn’s “crown jewel”, and “most prominent feature” on its National Register of Historic Places listing – thus, requiring protection and support);
- are unproven as a popular burial method (no data is provided to support *free-standing* walls as a popular choice); and
- once installed, will be costly and difficult to remove if they prove unpopular; subjecting the Committee and the town of Salem to a lot of extra work (and expense) under fraught conditions given that some families may have chosen this interment already.

The Plan notes that Greenlawn and its neighboring spaces make up one of the largest undeveloped areas of Salem, providing *expansive habitat* for wildlife, certain flora, and both active & passive recreation (p.17-18, my emphasis). This is important, as bit-by-bit curbing of this expansive space (especially via free-standing columbaria) will erode it away.

The proposed columbaria wall on the west side of Sargent Pond (p.45, Site G) – where a retaining wall is needed – *should be considered before the Chapel west slope*. In the event that columbaria niches have limited take-up, the wall will still serve the purpose as a retaining wall.

For cremated remains, in-ground burial and scattering sites make sense, although it’s not clear in the Plan what exactly is meant by “scattering sites”. Unless I missed it, the Plan does not include a place for memorial plaques for those who choose to scatter cremated remains.

#5. I disagree with the idea to create a Visitor Parking area inside Greenlawn along Aspen Avenue (p.64) – it’s not necessary or practical and harms the Arboretum, requiring the removal of existing shrubs and, possibly, trees, as well as likely damaging tree root systems. It will also *crowd* the cemetery, destroying the character and quality of the historic landscape.

#6. Finally, the Plan fails to even bring up the subject of an additional cemetery for Salem. I appreciate this topic may seem outside the scope of the Plan, but it is not. Even if the recommended full burial sites are added, Greenlawn will run out of full burial space in about 10 years (at the current rate), and then where will we be? We’ll *still* need to find another cemetery spot, while the fate of the Arboretum is unclear – certainly Greenlawn’s historic character and landscape will be diminished, and possibly the Arboretum withered away. Thus, the need to at least *discuss* additional cemetery space cannot be avoided.

Salem has a detailed *Housing Road Map* (5-year plan) which states that Salem’s population is growing and has an increasing share of residents over age 65 compared to regional and statewide averages (*Salem Housing Road Map*, p.8). We may wonder how that affects planning for burial space. The *Housing Road Map* identifies potential additional land for affordable housing development. Why was potential additional cemetery land not even mentioned in the Plan? It certainly begs the question of whether there may be a location(s) that could be considered (not limited to the locations in the *Housing Road Map*). Due to the lead time involved for a new cemetery, and competing interests for the space, the time is *now* to discuss it.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

Margaret Fleming
Salem Resident, Ward 6