



# Anchorage Memorial Park Cemetery White Paper

*Planning beyond the first 100 years...*

DRAFT

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September 2017



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Established in 1915, the Anchorage Memorial Park Cemetery serves as a beautiful setting for honoring those who have died in our community. With the current number of interments increasing each year, the cemetery is projected to be out of gravesite space for burials in the public sections of the cemetery by 2028.

The cemetery has a total of 17,525 gravesites, both public and private, and is running out of sites in the public areas for burials of adult caskets. Today 66% or 11,568 of the total gravesites are either occupied or reserved. Of the remaining 34% or 5,957, only 2,400 are available in the public areas. At the current burial and reservation rates, the public areas will reach capacity in just over 10 years or by 2028. When that occurs, at-need burial sites for adult caskets will no longer be available to the public and only reservations will be honored in the public areas.

The timeline for private areas reaching their capacity varies from 60 years for the Catholic Archdiocese of Anchorage to 300 years for the tract owned by the Loyal Order of the Moose #1534.

The Columbarium Wall is an outdoor above ground structure that offers families a year round option for interment for those who have chosen cremation. The Columbarium Wall was dedicated in 2003 and is designed with three differently sized receptacles or niches. The 3,861 niches in the wall can hold up to 9,243 urns. To date, 469 niches have been sold which equals 12% of the total space available. On average, families purchase 30 niches each year. If that trend continues, the Columbarium Wall niches will be available for the next 100 or more years.

**Background**

In 1915, the Anchorage Memorial Park Cemetery was established by President Woodrow Wilson’s Executive Order. The 22 acre cemetery includes gravesites, a Columbarium Wall, service buildings, the cemetery office and meeting room, roads, parking areas and landscaping features with



approximately 20 acres available for burials. In 1918, President Wilson authorized the sale of half of the cemetery's 20 Tracts (approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an acre each) to local organizations wishing to honor their deceased members. Of the 10 private Tracts that were sold, three now belong to the Pioneers of Alaska Igloo 15, two are owned by the Catholic Archdiocese of Anchorage, one each to the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, the Free and Accepted Masons Anchorage Lodge #17, Loyal Order of Moose #1534, and the American Legion Jack Henry Post 1. In 1951 six acres of unutilized cemetery property was conditionally sold to the Alaska Housing Authority for the Willow Park apartment buildings. The Municipality was designated as the managing agency of the cemetery in 1979. The Willow Park apartments were demolished in 1991 and the property reverted back to the cemetery adding 4,500 gravesites.

Annually, the cemetery conducts an average of 175 burials in the public Tracts. In addition, the Cemetery Director receives reservations for approximately 50 more gravesites. Those arrangements take 225 gravesites off the list of available public sites. Private Tract burial rates vary from group to group. The Catholic Archdiocese of Anchorage averages 12 burials a year while the Loyal Order of the Moose #1534 averages 1 burial a year. Occupancy (burials and reservations) rates in the private Tracts also varies. The Catholic Archdiocese of Anchorage Tract is at 52% of capacity and the Loyal Order of Moose #1534 Tract is currently at 23% of capacity.

The Anchorage Memorial Park Cemetery Advisory Board was established in 1991. The Advisory Board reviews the operation of the cemetery and makes recommendations to the Administration, and to the Cemetery Director regarding the revision of rules and regulations for cemetery services. Since its inception, the Advisory Board has recommended numerous improvements to the cemetery. One of the most significant improvements includes the installation of the wrought-iron fence around the perimeter of the cemetery as well as the Columbarium Wall and the purchase and installation of a carillon bell tower.

In 1993 the cemetery was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The cemetery internet website was established in 1999 and formal mapping of the graves was added in 2001. In 2006 the cemetery installed an underground irrigation system and shortly thereafter, a well was added to the system. This addition saved thousands of dollars in utility costs every year.

In 2009 local volunteers created the Cemetery Stories tour. In addition, the John Bagoy Solstice Tour is offered during the summer months and both events have brought positive attention to the unique individuals interred in the cemetery. These public education events have remained very popular for both visitors and residents.

In 2013 the cemetery was one of first in the nation to embrace Quick Response (QR) codes utilized with mobile devices as a way to enhance the memorialization opportunities for families with online obituaries, photos and guest books. In 2014 with the Advisory Board's support, and with the Anchorage Assembly's approval, the prohibition against upright markers in Tracts A & B was



reversed. This change in policy allowed families to install above ground markers and provides an opportunity to locate the gravesites in the winter months which is not possible with flat markers.

The 2015 centennial celebrations were capped off with the “burial” of a 100 year time capsule with items from the Municipality, Tract holders, business partners, board members and friends. In 2016 the cemetery was selected as the fifth cemetery in the nation to receive the Tears Foundation Angel of Hope monument. The Angel of Hope monument allows families grieving the death of an infant to memorialize their child by having their child’s name carved into a wing of the angel. In 2017 the Anchorage Parks Foundation began a campaign to raise funds for an electronic carillon bell tower as an enhancement to the cemetery. The new bell tower and seating area will serve the cemetery visitors and neighboring community with beautiful music and enhance the spirit of the cemetery as its new, iconic landmark.

### **The Changing Landscape of Anchorage Memorial Park Cemetery from 1915 to the Present**

Burial requirements have changed many times since 1915. Historical records indicate the space needed for one adult casket in the older part of the cemetery (Tracts 1-20) was a gravesite measuring 4 feet x 6 feet. The number of gravesites per Tract is based on those dimensions and varies between 580 and 640. In 1997 burial vaults (protective covers over the casket) were required for all casket burials. The burial vaults help ensure the cemetery grounds remain as level as possible. Due to the size of the vaults, the space needed for one adult casket increased to 5 feet x 10 feet. Those dimensions were superimposed over the established 4’ x 6’ gravesites and thus eliminated hundreds of the adult burial gravesites that existed due to a lack of space. Honoring reservations made prior to the vault requirement is a challenge since the dimensions have changed and the grave may encroach on the surrounding gravesites.

Gravesites that cannot accommodate an adult vault are labeled as “short” gravesites. These short sites are appropriate for families that need to bury an urn, bury an infant or child’s casket and for those who are interested in placing a memorial marker in the cemetery. Because the number of the remaining gravesites includes these short gravesites, trees, bushes and irrigation stations, a firm number of available adult gravesites is difficult to determine.

Grave mapping software is available that could record the locations and dimensions of every gravesite and more accurately identify viable gravesites. A Geographic Information System (GIS) could blend digital mapping and cemetery record management software with the historical paper and pencil record and the current web based database. Migrating the historical burial data, maps and documents to an electronic record would also be very beneficial if anything drastic were to happen to the cemetery office building although photographs of the maps have been completed. A digital map of the cemetery would also help visitors locate individual gravesites with more accuracy and be useful when the staff are unavailable. The current mapping is vague, not entirely accurate, not user friendly and does not take advantage of commonly available technology such as GPS or Google Earth.



## **Problem Statement**

When the available gravesites are either occupied or reserved, the cemetery will be at capacity. 6 of the original 20 Tracts are already at capacity. The remaining public Tracts will be at capacity in 10 years. The private Tracts will be at capacity in 60-300 years depending on the organization. When the cemetery reaches capacity, burials for reservation holders will only be conducted during the summer season due to the frozen ground and snow cover occurring in the fall and winter months. Winter burials require an insulated gravesite. The winter burials are assigned an insulated lot (1 of 70) on a next in line basis.

Insulated lots are still susceptible to a deep freeze and the cemetery contractor may not be able to prepare a winter gravesite depending on the location in relationship to other gravesites. The lots in the older Tracts (1-20) are very difficult to access and identify in the winter months since the snow will cover the markers. Lots in Tract A & B are slightly less challenging to locate in the winter, but they will still be frozen and covered with snow, thus rendering them inaccessible except in the summer months.

Except for members of the Jewish, Muslim and Catholic faiths winter burial will not be an option. Burials for the Jewish and Muslim faiths should be conducted within 24 hours of the death and require preparation of a few graves in the fall for use in the winter months. From time to time the Catholic Archdiocese of Anchorage has also requested graves be prepared in the fall.

## **Recommendations**

### **1 to 5 years**

Develop a cemetery record management system utilizing GIS technology to preserve the cemetery burial records.

Acquire a minimum of 10 acres for another municipal cemetery in the Anchorage bowl. Adding space to the existing 22 acres is not feasible in the next five years.

The cemetery has an option to revoke reservations if no re-confirmation has been made by the reservation holder after 20 years. The number of sites to reclaim varies from year to year with the average being five per year. This process would add a few more sites every year, but not a significant number.

Encourage “stack burial” arrangements. Placing two family member’s caskets in the same gravesite uses one site for two caskets. However, due to the space required and the impacts to the surrounding area, stack burials can only be conducted safely in certain public areas of the cemetery. This option may save a few sites every year, but not a significant number.

Return private Tract land for public burial sites. If the private Tract owners were willing to give unused portions of their property back to the cemetery this would add to the number of available public sites. However, because most private Tracts have burials recorded in a scattered pattern and not in rows, their deceased members could be buried among members of the public who are not necessarily members of their organization. In 2001, the Masons offered to return to the cemetery a portion measuring 30 feet x 200 feet, of their unoccupied property equaling 100 gravesites. At the time, they were informed that the parcel was too small for the Municipality to accept.



## **6 to 15 years**

Move the Community Work Service program out of the east portion of the cemetery office building and convert that space into an indoor columbarium with a minimal renovation/installation investment. An indoor columbarium with 500 glass/bronze fronted niches would generate \$500,000 at current rates before it reached capacity.

Demolish the “barn area” and outdoor storage area and convert that space into 140 gravesites. The fenced “barn area” houses the contractor’s office in a “movable building.” The area also serves as storage for three 10 yard mounds of dirt/sand/gravel, two 300 gallon fuel tanks, maintenance equipment, the markers to be set, and the cemetery back hoe. When the cemetery is in need of these gravesites, on-site storage or storage in close proximity should be provided for the equipment as it needs to be available for daily use or with little notice.

Demolish the barn and erect a mausoleum for above ground interments. Depending on the style, 60 crypts could be offered to purchase.

A five acre cemetery in Girdwood will be developed in the next few years and the Municipality will be the managing agent. The acreage and development plan in Girdwood may not be suitable as an alternative burial site for residents of the Anchorage bowl. Its distance from the Anchorage bowl, and non-traditional burial plans, may be a factor as families make plans for honoring their deceased family members.

## **16 to 25 years**

Demolish the barn area, the shop and the cemetery office buildings. Convert the land into another columbarium, a mausoleum and/or new gravesites.

Convert all or part of Fairbanks Street to the east of the cemetery into cemetery property adding 700 gravesites.

Move east to Gambell Street. Remove the buildings on the east side of Fairbanks Street and convert the area to cemetery property. This could potentially add 8000 gravesites and extend the life of the cemetery another 50 years.

When the public part of the cemetery is full, the municipality will honor the reservations and inform the public of local burial options in Girdwood, Angelus Memorial Park and Ft. Richardson National Cemetery. The cemetery will continue to honor all of the deceased and be maintained as a place of quiet reflection and dignity.

## **Conclusion**

If current burial trends continue, the cemetery will be at capacity in the public Tracts by 2028. If the Municipality plans to continue providing burial space for the community, there are several options that may be considered. The Administration may choose to obtain additional land in the Anchorage bowl with a long term goal of several decades of useful life for adult casket burials. A new cemetery without the free land provision would enable the Municipality to obtain a revenue source for years to come. Pet memorials and burials, private and public mausoleums, scattering gardens and other popular options may be considered. An onsite committal shelter or indoor chapel would also



enhance the options for honoring loved ones and could extend the life of the cemetery. With the public Tracts reaching capacity by 2028, it will be necessary for the Administration, in partnership with the Anchorage Assembly and the Anchorage Memorial Park Cemetery Advisory Board, to develop a strategic plan for the cemetery.

# APPENDIX



Anchorage Memorial Park Cemetery

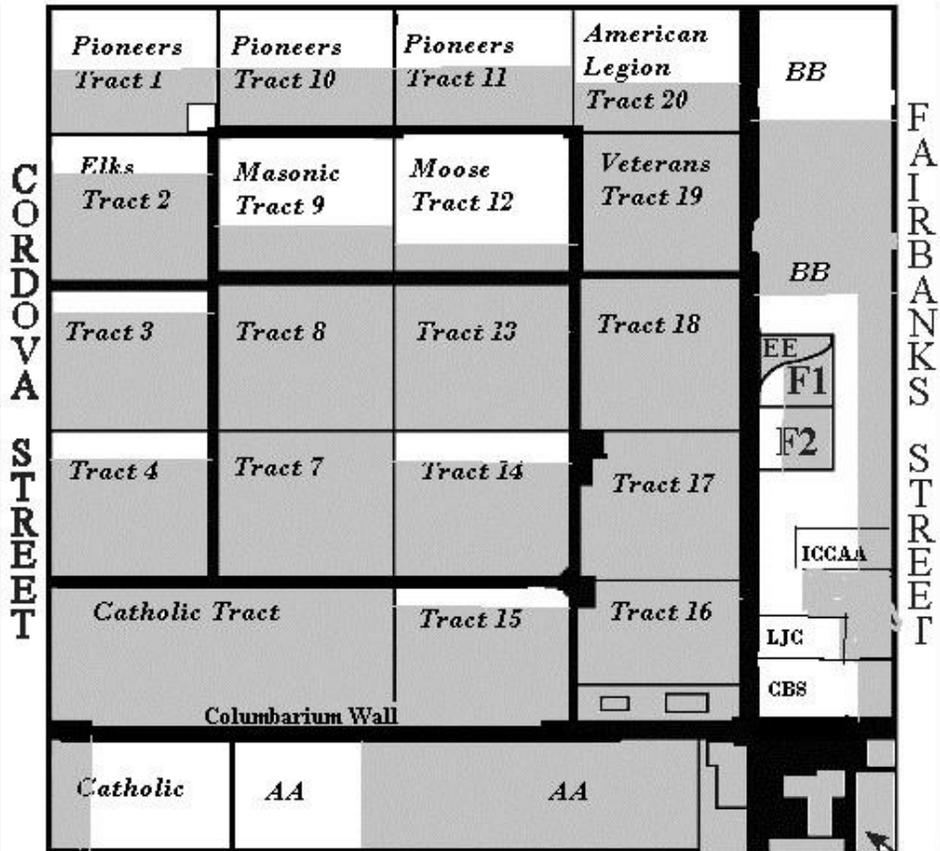
Capacities

Tract Owner	Trct #'s	# of graves	# of avail	% avail	5yr avg burial/yr	est. yrs to capacity	yr
Pioneers of AK Igloo 15	1, 10, 11	1784	976	54.71%	8.2	119.02	2136
BPO Elks	2	630	278	44.13%	0.8	347.50	2365
Catholic Archdioces of Anch	5,6 & RUP AA	1578	767	48.61%	12.8	59.92	2077
F. & A. Masons	9	640	403	62.97%	1.2	335.83	2353
LO Moose	12	640	494	77.19%	1.6	308.75	2326
American Legion Post 1	20	580	349	60.17%	2.2	158.64	2176
Cong Beth Shalom	RUP BB	320	288	90.00%	1.2	240.00	2257
		6,172	3,555		28	208.64	
Public Tract		11,353	2,400	21.14%	240	10.00	2027
					burial/resv		
		17,525					



SHERATON HOTEL

SIXTH AVENUE



EE = Cremains  
 F1 = Infant  
 F2 = Child

Gray areas  
 are occupied  
 or reserved

NINTH AVENUE

CEMETERY OFFICE





EXECUTIVE ORDER

CHUGACH NATIONAL FOREST  
ALASKA

It is hereby ordered, under authority of the Act of Congress approved June 4, 1897 (30 Stat., 11, 34-36), that the tracts of land in Alaska bounded as hereinafter described be excluded from the Chugach National Forest, and that such tracts, pursuant to the provisions of the Act of Congress approved March 12, 1914 (38 Stat., 305), be, and they are hereby, withdrawn from settlement, location, sale, entry, or other disposition, and reserved for townsite purposes and for other purposes in connection with the construction and operation of railroad lines under said act, under such regulations as have been or may hereafter be prescribed:

Southern Addition to Anchorage Townsite

Beginning at meander corner No. 3 of Anchorage Townsite, thence East 73.84 chains; thence South 41.48 chains; thence West 117.04 chains to meander corner at the mouth of Campbell Creek; thence with the meanders of Knik Arm North 44° 03' 23" East 57.77 chains to the point of beginning, containing 402.11 acres;

Eastern Addition to Anchorage Townsite

Beginning at the true point for the quarter section corner on the south boundary of Section 8, T.



13 N., R. 3 W., Seward Meridian, thence West 39.95 chains to corner of Sections 7, 8, 17 and 18, said township; thence South 0° 08' East 14.28 chains; thence West 29.07 chains to corner No. 1 of Anchorage Townsite; thence South 28.18 chains; thence East 13.03 chains; thence South 13.03 chains; thence West 13.03 chains; thence South 2.88 chains to corner No. 2 of Anchorage Townsite; thence East 89.00 chains; thence North 58.35 chains to the point of beginning, containing approximately 344.08 acres;

Alaska Railroad Terminal Reserve

Beginning at the corner of Sections 7, 8, 17 and 18, T. 13 N., R. 3 W., Seward Meridian, thence East 39.95 chains to the true point for the quarter section corner on the south boundary of Section 8; thence North 0° 05' West 39.96 chains; thence West 99.96 chains along the quarter section line through Sections 8 and 7 to its intersection with ordinary high water mark on the east shore of Knik Arm; thence southwesterly along ordinary high water mark on the eastern shore of Knik Arm and crossing the mouth of Ship Creek to the northwest corner of Anchorage Townsite; thence East 89.06 chains; thence North 0° 08' West 14.28 chains to the point of beginning, containing 551.63 acres;

Cemetery Reserve

Beginning at a point on the east boundary of Anchorage Townsite in T. 13 N., R. 3 W., Seward Meridian, 15.91 chains North of the southeast corner thereof, thence East 13.03 chains; thence South 13.03 chains; thence West 13.03 chains; thence North 13.03 chains to the point of beginning, containing 16.98 acres.

*Andersen*  
----->

THE WHITE HOUSE,

31 August, 1915.



EXECUTIVE ORDER.

ALASKA

Anchorage Townsite.

RECEIVED  
APR 11 1918  
DEPARTMENT OF STATE

1  
1918

Under the provisions of the Act of Congress, approved March 13, 1914 (38 Stat., 305), entitled: "An Act To authorize the President of the United States to locate, construct, and operate railroads in the Territory of Alaska, and for other purposes", it is hereby ordered that the tract of land designated as a "Cemetery Reserve" on the plat of Anchorage Townsite with South and East Additions, approved May 8, 1916, be subdivided into appropriate tracts or blocks and the Secretary of the Interior is hereby authorized to dispose of such tracts or blocks at private sale to religious or fraternal organizations qualified to hold title to real estate, at an appraised price to be fixed under such rules and regulations as the Secretary may prescribe; Provided, that not more than one half in the aggregate of said "Cemetery Reserve" shall be so sold; and Provided further, that at least one half of said Reserve shall be surveyed into burial lots of suitable size which shall be open to burial privileges by the public without charge for the land, a record of such burials to be kept as may be directed in said regu-

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lations and turned over to the municipal authorities  
when the town is incorporated, and that a patent shall  
then be issued to said authorities for all portions  
of said "Cemetery Reserve" remaining unsold.

*Woodrow Wilson*

The White House,

10 April , 1918.

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