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Group hopes to bring new life to cemetery

By Tom McGhee
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Father Joseph Hirsch is involved in a movement to save Riverside cemetery from decay. He visits section of the graveyard where his church has a small chapel used for ceremonies. (Post / RJ Sangosti)

What do you do if you have relatives in neglected graves at Riverside Cemetery or just a soft spot for a once-serene boneyard where the hardpacked earth is studded with tufts of dead grass?

If you are Janice Allan of Florissant, who has 45 family members buried in the graveyard on the Denver-Commerce City border, you help form a group dedicated to rescuing it.

"My relatives paid for their plots to be taken care of through a perpetual-care fund," said Allan. "All the 100-year-old trees are dying - it is in deplorable condition."

The group, Friends of Riverside, which is filing for nonprofit status, plans to form a foundation that will focus public attention on the neglected graveyard.

Fairmount Cemetery Inc., owner of Riverside since 1900, can't afford to take care of the 77-acre site, where more than 67,000 people are buried.

A \$2.1 million endowment generates about \$62,000 a year, but it doesn't provide enough money to water the property and properly care for the graves, said Fairmount president Kelly Briggs.

Fairmount still has two full-time groundskeepers who mow and trim the grass and pick up trash at the cemetery.

"We try to keep it looking neat," Briggs said.

Lost money for years

Fairmount stopped watering in 2003. Two years later, the company stopped selling gravesites, saying it was losing money on the sales.

In 2003, the last year the cemetery was fully operational, Fairmount lost \$159,000, Briggs said.

Fairmount approached Dave Ferrill, the mayor's director of regional cooperation, in early 2005 and asked if Denver would take over Riverside, said Sarah E. Moss, spokeswoman for the mayor's office.

"The city evaluated the option and declined to pursue the purchase because of the city's budget situation," Moss said.

With no funding stream and no well-heeled savior waiting in the wings, the 35 or so members of Friends of Riverside face a daunting task.

Individuals involved with the group also approached Fairmount and asked to have the property transferred to them, said Father Joseph Hirsch of Holy Transfiguration of Christ Cathedral, an Orthodox church in Globeville, whose founders are buried there.

"We made an offer to them, and it was being negotiated by an attorney who wanted to make Fairmount reopen Riverside as a working cemetery," Hirsch said. Fairmount told them to put up \$1 million for operating funds and the company would consider turning over the existing endowment to them and transferring the property, Briggs said.

"The endowment is not going to pay for everything that needs to be done if they don't have backing," Briggs said. "We just don't want to turn it over to someone that loses everything and you have to shut the gates."

Hugh Graham, a member of the Friends of Riverside group, sees a future where hardy plants with little need for water decorate the grounds.

"We have an opportunity to create a more appropriate landscape," said Graham, a performance and media artist in Denver.

Such a landscape could cost millions and take years, he admits.

Some of those who love the cemetery have muscle to bring to the job of restoring it, and they feel Fairmount has needlessly rejected their help in the past.

Volunteers defy refusal

Two years ago, when the Sons of Union Veterans asked permission to refurbish a flagpole and add a brick walk at a section of the grounds where several hundred Civil War veterans are buried, Fairmount's board of directors said no.

The Sons of Union Veterans, which holds a deed for the gravesites passed down from the Grand Army of the Republic, wanted to do the work themselves, said Gary Mitchell, Sons of Union Veterans president.

Allowing the group to do the work could have exposed the cemetery to liability if something went wrong, Briggs said.

He suggested that the group establish an endowment so projects to honor the veterans could be funded in perpetuity.

"That is grossly unacceptable," Mitchell said. "I don't know what care it would take when you are just putting in some bricks."

Since his group has a deed to the grave block, its members can do the work with or without Fairmount's permission, Mitchell said. And they intend to do it.

"The cemetery is open from 8 to 5, and they can't throw us out," he said. "We are going to talk to them first, but my position is going to be, 'We own the block, and you are not caring for it. We are going to do what we can to improve it.' "

Friends of Riverside has no firm plan on how to go about recovering the rest of the graveyard's former glory, said Allan.

Ideally, the cemetery would be treated as a historic park, she said. For that to happen, Fairmount would have to take care of the graveyard or transfer it to a company or government entity that would take responsibility.

Whatever happens, the group can't do much without Fairmount, Allan said.

"Fairmount has to cooperate, and we haven't got there yet," she said.

Fairmount has been cooperating, Briggs said.

"The requirements were put out, and they didn't wish to meet those requirements," he said.

Meanwhile, trees are dead or dying, and the graves of political giants, scalawags, hookers, immigrants and generations of hardworking citizens remain neglected.
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