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Pioneer Cemetery Plan OKed

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The Pleasanton City Council approved a master plan for the Pleasanton Pioneer Cemetery that will expand burials and upgrade the site.

The vote was unanimous.

A decision will be made in the future on whether to construct the plan in phases or fund the entire plan. The cost to finance the entire plan is \$4.5 million. Projected return on the investment is \$36 million as sites are purchased over the years.

The approval included withdrawing \$170,000 from the city cemetery fund to pay for professional services. The fund balance is \$393,081 generated by the sale of burial sites. Completion of the entire plan will be dependent upon the extent of future improvements anticipated to be offset by the sale of future burial plots.

An ad hoc Pioneer Cemetery Master Plan Oversight Committee prepared the plan for the 5.2 acre site on Sunol Boulevard. The Master Plan includes a detailed site design concept, a business plan, a construction cost estimate, new maintenance standards and recommended operational standards.

Kathleen Yurchak, assistant director of Operation Services, told the council that the goal of the plan is to preserve the cemetery's history and create a self-sustaining parklike setting. One of the priorities would be a new Veterans Memorial to be located in the historic flag circle.

Gary and Nancy Harrington and local veterans groups have pledged to raise funds for the memorial.

Among the proposed actions included in the upgrade plans are the following:

Convert the Cemetery's roads to one-way and add a new loop road to the South Hill Dry Creek Garden area located at the southern portion of the Cemetery.

Develop new pedestrian paths through the historic section of the cemetery and the expanded South Hill Dry Creek Garden and add three new gathering areas, including a Veteran's Memorial plaza.

Expand the availability of burial options.

Councilmember Karla Brown wondered if there had been research undertaken to find a buyer to operate the facility. If it remained in city hands, she didn't think the city should operate it. She noted that there has been no controversy over the plan. "The numbers are pretty attractive. I hope the city will remain open to the idea of different management."

Yurchak suggested that the city could look at different ways to manage and maintain the cemetery.

Mayor Jerry Thorne stated that he hadn't expected the business plan to play out in such a positive manner. He proposed accelerating the project. "It's a great asset for the city. The veterans' memorial is something that we will be very proud of having built."

Councilmember Cheryl Cook-Kallio called it a beautiful job. "This is something that shows we honor our history."

Several veterans addressed the council, urging approval of the plan and moving forward quickly in carrying it out. They liked the idea of the memorial as a place to visit and remember their fallen comrades.

Former councilmember Frank Brandes said he was concerned about living long enough to see the plan become a reality. He pointed out that there were various ways to fund the project, including in lieu funds paid by the Auf der Maur project or a bond measure.

A member of the committee, Frank Cappella, suggested that the project return would be enough to pay for the improvements and maintain it for years to come. He commented that the expanded burial sites would sell out. The city should begin looking for another 5 to 10 acres for a future cemetery.

The Pleasanton Memorial Gardens was first established in 1850 as a non-endowment cemetery. Many of Pleasanton's founding pioneers are buried there, including Kottinger, Joshua and Neal, as are many military veterans. In 1882, the cemetery was purchased by the Independent Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF), Pleasanton Lodge # 225. The Lodge was disbanded in 1999. The IOOF continued to operate the cemetery until September 2006 when with the support of Cemetery advocates, the City Council exercised an option to purchase the cemetery with an understanding that it would be maintained consistent with Pioneer Cemetery and work with the Catholic Funeral and Cemetery Services (CFCS) to provide burial services for persons who had already prepaid for existing plots within the Cemetery. On June 5, 2007, the cemetery's name was changed from Pleasanton Memorial Gardens to the Pleasanton Pioneer Cemetery.

The city has made general improvements and conducted a study for surveying plot verification and pre-installation of 202 new vaults and 202 cremation niches.

Consideration of a funding plan will be part of the capital improvement plan discussion in early 2015.