

Should Your Master Plan Include a Natural Burial Area?

by Daniel M. Isard, MSFS

RECENTLY, a new cemetery client asked me to help repurpose a Master Plan. For those of you who are not regular readers, a Master Plan is the long-term plan for your undeveloped areas and maybe any developed areas that have not been sold or interred into yet.

Good consultants usually answer a question with a question. My reply was, “If you had a restaurant, would you only have a few items on the menu, or would you try and provide variety?” Most cemeterians are limited in their mindset. Natural Burial is a viable and profitable option that may work.

What Is Natural Burial?

Well, it is basically a Kosher burial option, where the body is not embalmed with caustic materials. But that is the very limited interpretation. This can be conjugated to include a container holding the body that

are many people who have an increasing environmental consciousness. There are about 2.5 million electric vehicles on the road in the United States. That might only be 1% of all autos, but these are people who are willing to pay more to purchase an electric vehicle.

Green funerals are not offered in every cemetery. This is a point of differentiation. My research has shown that people will drive three times farther to go to a cemetery than a funeral home. They will go as far as needed for a green interment, rather than a non-green interment.

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must be biodegradable. It can include the limitation of equipment working in the Natural Burial area. It can be a matter whereby the cemetery seeks endorsement/approval from the Green Burial Council, which is a group that certifies that practices are up to their standards. I am not trying to endorse the GBC, but they do some good work in my experience.

The first question that anyone should ask is, “Why would I want to dedicate some of my land for the Natural Burial consumers?” Well, that is easy to answer! There

Pricing

Just as an electric vehicle is usually more expensive than the comparable gas automobile, green interment is more expensive (or should be) than non-green burial. Consumers are willing to pay extra for a green burial.

Green burials are typically more expensive for some basic matters. First of all, a green interment is usually in a larger space than a non-green burial. The grave is often hand dug and you cannot be as exacting when doing hand digging than when using

a tractor. You cannot pre-vault green spaces. So rather than have about 1,000 graves per acre, a green cemetery acre may have about 400 to 500 interments. That alone is going to increase the cost significantly. However, the green grave doesn't need a vault and often has a more natural grave marker, which saves the consumer money and makes the comparison more cost effective.

More than 80% of all interment rights sold in a cemetery are to people who have family and friends already interred in the cemetery. But if someone is green focused, that person will search out a cemetery with green options and that can benefit both historic and modern cemeteries. In some green cemeteries, we have seen consumers travel as far as 100 miles because there were no other green options.

Be the First

The benefits of offering green burial in your marketing area is the differentiation of your cemetery versus others. The press likes to talk about new and different. It is much more cathartic if you have people leave their vehicles at the entryway and walk behind a caisson that might be horse drawn or pulled by the mourners. Even if you don't make more sales, you will have many more inquiries.

The benefits of helping people plan for a green burial are dramatic. First, since this might be the consumer's first time planning a green interment, there are more things to talk about. The plans for getting to the cemetery site and the plans for the plantings post interment. The grave marker might be flowers or stone or both. People can help fill in the grave after the service. And the casket or shroud is going to be unique to that service.

By offering an area for green interment, you are finding a way to talk with consumers about your benefits without bringing price into the dialogue.

It Can Be Done

If you have a common cemetery, you might ask, "Where on this site do I put the green area?" This might be the best part about green! You might have an area that is less developed and that could be the perfect area. Green cemeteries are often not as well mowed, so an area that retains more of its forest look is better. You still need the care and measurement of the plotted areas, but there is more margin for error.

As the cemeterian, you get to decide what works for you. If you go to the same level that a Jewish cemetery would go to, and nothing more, that is green. If you go to the other extreme that meets the requirements for certification of the Green Burial Council, that could work as well. Of course, anything in the middle could work for you. 



Dan Isard, MSFS, is founder of The Foresight Companies LLC, a Phoenix-based business and management consulting firm specializing in mergers and acquisitions, valuations, accounting, financing HR services and family surveys. He is the author of several books and hundreds of published articles in industry magazines, including "The Director's Finance 201" column. He can be reached at 800.426.0165 or danisard@theforesightcompanies.com.

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