



TOWN of BROOKLINE
Massachusetts
Walnut Hills Cemetery
Old Burying Ground

Trustees

Lisa Farber
Gerard Hayes
Peggy Maguire
Randolph Meiklejohn, Chair
Joslin Ham Murphy

Director of Parks and Open Space
Alexandra Vecchio

Walnut Hills Cemetery Trustees Meeting
Tuesday, April 11, 2023
8:30 am -9:15 am
Zoom Webinar

Trustees Present: Gerard Hayes, Lisa Farber, Randolph Meiklejohn, Peggy Maguire, and Joslin Ham Murphy

Trustees Absent:

Staff Present: Alexandra Vecchio, Director of Parks and Open Space; Jessica White, Parks and Open Space Assistant; John Ronan, Cemetery Supervisor.

Welcome

Randolph Meiklejohn opened the meeting. A roll call was taken to make sure all Trustees and staff can hear this meeting and can participate; all responded affirmatively. He stated that this public meeting of the Trustees in open session is being conducted remotely, and in a matter that is consistent with the legislature's recent extension of the temporary provisions pertaining to the Open Meeting Law to March 31, 2025. This public body is authorized to meet remotely, without a quorum of the body physically present at a meeting location, so long as adequate alternative access to such remote meetings is provided. He advised that this meeting is being held, and some attendees may be participating by, video conference. All supporting materials that have been provided to members of this body are available at the town website attached to the invitation for this meeting. As chair, Randolph Meiklejohn will introduce each speaker on the agenda. After they conclude their remarks, he will invite each Trustee by name to provide a comment question or motion. He stated that each vote taken in this meeting will be conducted by roll call. He outlined the agenda.

Please click here to access all meeting documents:

<https://www.brooklinema.gov/DocumentCenter/Index/4028>

April 11, 2023 memorandum from Alexandra Vecchio to Walnut Hills Cemetery Trustees

Presentation, Discussion, and Possible Vote to Fund a Temporary, Part-Time Administrative Assistant Role at the Walnut Hills Cemetery.

Alexandra Vecchio stated that the last day of employment for John Ronan as Cemetery Supervisor will be Thursday, April 13. She stated that this role will need to be filled. She has had

numerous conversations with John about what was necessary for us to keep things moving forward, and to continue operations at the Cemetery while the role is being filled. She stated that John's role has been shifting and he is spending more time in the office, either dealing with customer service or business operations, as it relates to the Cemetery. She gave a few examples of this. She stated that while we want our Cemetery Supervisor position to be both out in the field and someone who's handling the business operations, she thinks it's a unique set of skills, and she does anticipate it being a niche market based on other positions that have been difficult to fill over the years within the DPW. She has spoken to John about the possibility of hiring a new part-time employee. This would be a non-benefited position and would be up to eighteen hours per week. This would help the Cemetery as it relates to data management, customer services, and just the overall business functions of the Cemetery while the department works to fill the Cemetery Supervisor position and train someone accordingly. She thinks at that point we would assess whether it's worthwhile to keep a part-time cemetery admin at Walnut Hills, or if it would revert to the Cemetery Supervisor. Alexandra Vecchio is suggesting that the Trustees consider funding this proposed part-time employee position from the Trust Fund TW23, the interest income that's generated from our non-expendable TW24 Account. She stated that we have been increasing the balance in that account for some time now, and this can be used for many different things. This includes special projects at the cemetery. She feels that this would be considered an appropriate use of those funds. She provided a rough estimate of what this position would cost the fund. She is suggesting that we would be able to use the TW23 funds not to exceed fifty thousand dollars in total. She stated that if we can fill the Cemetery Supervisor position, then we can certainly consider reducing the time for that admin. However, she feels that it will be necessary to get everyone through this transition period.

Joslin Murphy thanked John Ronan for all his service. She stated that she has a question concerning the Cemetery and Perpetual Care Fund. She stated that the Trustees are supervisors of the trust fund, and she believes but is not certain that the fund is supposed to be used for the care of the property and not for administrative costs. She thinks that is what the statute says, but she is not sure. She stated that once John leaves, the personnel account won't be expended, and she wondered why this administrative position couldn't be paid out of that account in John's absence. Alexandra Vecchio stated that the perpetual care fund can be used for any care for the property itself, and can also be used to support any staff person that is helping with the care of that cemetery. She feels that this would be within the larger scope of someone who is caring for the day-to-day operations of the business of the Cemetery. She stated that in terms of operations and budget FY24 includes the Cemetery Supervisor position, and she hopes to have someone in the position in FY24. She stated that we wouldn't be able to continue to fund both the administrative position as well as the full-time employee out of the operating budget. She stated that we could amend the operating budget for FY25, but it is too late in the process for FY24. Joslin Murphy stated that she believes that the perpetual care fund is for perpetual care of the Cemetery itself, for the land, and expansion and care of the property. Joslin Murphy wondered why we would not just pay for this part-time position until there's a hire, and then come back to the Trustees and ask for the expenditure of funds from the perpetual care fund. Alexandra Vecchio stated it is going to be difficult to fill the position, it is a non-benefited part-time position and that is already a challenge. In her experience, the ability to be able to offer someone the certainty of having a position for one year, and being able to make that clear to them at the beginning is certainly helpful. She stated that it is something that the Town has done with other part-time positions within the DPW and has been included in the offer letter from Human Resources. Gerry Hayes stated that he is assuming that Alexandra Vecchio and DPW Commissioner Erin Gallentine have done a thorough look at the whole DPW budget, to Joslin's point it seems to him that you could find the money within the eight-and-a-half million dollars budget of the Public Works Department. He wonders if that has been considered and if all options have been exhausted there. Alexandra

Vecchio replied with a yes. She stated that it was Commissioner Gallentine's suggestion to use TW23 because of the constraints on the operating budget

Peggie Maguire wanted to thank John for all his service. She stated that he has great customer service skills and has done a phenomenal job at the Cemetery. She wished him well in all his new endeavors. Peggy Maguire wondered if he had any thoughts about any of the existing staff and if they had any of the skill sets to handle any of these responsibilities. He stated that in terms of staff, you only have one option, Chloe Fernstein, who is currently doing the historical audit. She is very familiar with HMIS and street books. She has seen all the deeds and has been present for several sales in the office. She technically hasn't done a sale, but she's been there and knows the process. She is working part-time for the Town and works part-time at the Simmons College library. Peggy Maguire stated that it sounds to her that she would be an appropriate candidate for this part-time position. John Ronan replied with a yes in his opinion. There would be a learning curve, but she has a background in this. John Ronan detailed the size of his current staff. Alexandra Vecchio stated that the Cemetery Supervisor role is a union position and there were no applications internally. Peggy Maguire stated that John Ronan is in the network of other cemeteries, and wondered if he had any thoughts on recruiting aspects for the unique set of skills. John Ronan stated that it is a small pool of people, and feels that the job is going to be difficult to fill because of the unique skill set. Peggy Maguire stated that it is unfortunate there were no internal candidates, but suggested that we look to our contacts with the various funeral homes in the Greater Brookline area, maybe they would know someone that would have that skill set.

Lisa Farber thanked John Ronan for his service and hard work. She stated that she agrees with Jocelyn. She wonders why we need to deviate from the standard operating procedure of paying employees from the employee or personnel fund. She would love to see the actual wording of the perpetual care fund. She stated that we must adhere to what is written down. Randolph asked Alexandra if we have the exact language of the purpose of that fund. Alexandra Vecchio stated that anything more than the kind of brief cemetery perpetual care expenditure fund title she would have to do some research for. Joslin Murphy stated that she just looked it up while the meeting has been underway. She read out loud from Chapter 114 Section 15, which is entitled Appropriation for Enclosing and Improving Public Cemetery Sale, or conveyance of Burial Rights disposition of Proceeds. She stated that she won't read the entire paragraph, but at the end it says, the proceeds of such sales, meaning Cemetery burial spaces shall be paid into the Town treasuries be kept separate from other funds and be appropriated to reimburse the Town for the cost of the land, its care, improvement, and embellishment or the enlargement of the Cemetery. She stated that all of those costs relate to the land itself and its care, that's her reading. She does not know the answer to the question, but she does not believe that this fund is appropriate to be used for administrative personnel costs, but she would defer to Alexandra and Town Counsel. Joslin Murphy stated there's a need to be filled, but wonders if these positions have been advertised. Alexandra Vecchio stated that the Cemetery Supervisor position has been posted, and listed those places that it had been advertised. She stated that the part-time administrative position has not been posted, and without funding secured she would not have Human Resources approval to advertise such a position. Joslin Murphy stated that John Ronan's personnel account will certainly be available until there's a hire. Alexandra Vecchio stated that for the advertising and the continuity of it, she thinks it will be more difficult to fill, especially since it is a non-benefited position.

Alexandra Vecchio stated that after speaking with John, the field-based skills are something that we can train up rather quickly. However, she thinks it takes a little more time if you don't have a background in business administration, including selling and maintaining lots, preparing for special services, and coordinating with the funeral directors. All those things obviously can also be learned but she feels that would be the gap in the skill set as we go through the recruitment process. She feels

that is the area where we are going to need to do some coverage, but obviously, the Cemetery has to continue functioning whether there is a Cemetery Supervisor or not. She stated that she is relying on some of the other staff to step in and fill that gap. In the interim, she fears that since it took sixteen months to fill a Forestry position on the Parks team and because this is also a niche position, she feels that we might see a similar situation here.

Joslin Murphy stated that she does not disagree with Alexandra's thinking at all, she feels that somebody has to fill this role. However, she does not think this is the right account to pay it from. She stated that there is a significant pot of money available to pay for this position. It's just not making it a permanent one-year position, it's a temporary position. She does not feel comfortable paying for administrative costs out of the Cemetery Perpetual Care Trust Fund without having more information. Joslin Murphy feels like that is a question for the Town Treasurer and/or Town Counsel. She would say that from her experience this has never been done before, to her knowledge, the Trustees have not been asked to pay for administrative support from the Perpetual Care Trust Fund.

Randolph Meiklejohn asked Alexandra if she knew of any record of expenditures voted from this fund has been, and what the range of types of costs have been. Alexandra Vecchio stated that she does not have those specific votes in front of her, but her understanding is that this has been used to support some of the projects that have happened around the Cemetery in terms of the roadway and drainage and costs for the consulting services. She stated that possibly in the past it may have been used to support some of what we call landscaping supplies and services for some events at the Cemetery. Randolph stated that it does align with Jocelyn's concern about the purpose of the fund. Alexandra Vecchio stated that the Cemetery has TW24, which is the non-expendable fund, TW23, which is the perpetual care, expendable fund, and then it also has the Cemetery perpetual care fund SW01, which requires an appropriation by Town Meeting for those funds to be utilized.

Joslin Murphy stated that she feels like there is an interim solution, which is John's vacant position account. She feels that it can certainly pay for a temporary position until there's a hire. She is not comfortable permitting access to the Perpetual Care Trust Fund for an administrative position today. Alexandra Vecchio and Joslin Murphy discussed SW01, the Cemetery Perpetual Care Fund, and a transfer that occurs of one hundred thousand dollars to the General Fund every fiscal year. This fund is based on fifty percent of the sale of lots and one hundred percent of any of the service charges. She stated that one of the purposes of the Perpetual Care Fund is to pay for maintaining the Cemetery, and—frankly—in the future enlarging it. She thinks that we have to be very careful with the expenditure of these funds.

Randolph Meiklejohn asked Alexandra Vecchio if Human Resources will allow her to advertise two positions at the same time if they're reliant on the same funding. Alexandra Vecchio stated that she will need to have a conversation with the Assistant Town Administrator and Human Resources. Alexandra Vecchio would need to be able to demonstrate that she has enough funding available in the Cemetery operating budget to be able to support those positions if they were both filled. Alexandra Vecchio stated that based off the previous conversation, she is only speculating that something like this would not get approved. Joslin Murphy stated that for a one-year position no, but for a temporary position she thinks yes, and then there is the option to get a Reserve Fund transfer to pay for the cost because of the unexpected departure of John Ronan. Alexandra wanted to clarify that even a year's position is considered temporary.

Randolph Meiklejohn asked Joslin to clarify what this Reserve Fund concept is as a source of funding. Joslin Murphy stated that the Reserve Fund is funded by Town Meeting, but it is accessed for unforeseen expenditures. She gave an example of this. Randolph Meiklejohn and Alexandra Vecchio discussed how a Reserve Fund transfer process works. Alexandra Vecchio stated that she would have to talk to the Commissioner and see if would be comfortable with something like this.

She stated that in her conversation with Commissioner Gallentine, this was not something that she brought up when this part-time admin position and the funding source for it were discussed.

Randolph Meiklejohn stated that his sense of the Trustees here this morning is that there is a lot of reluctance about the purpose of the fund related to the nature of this request. He would like for Alexandra to take that next step and speak to the Commissioner. Alexandra Vecchio will have that conversation with her and will follow up with the Trustees after that. Randolph Meiklejohn asked Alexandra to share the language, such as it is addressing the purpose of the fund that they have been discussing this morning. Alexandra Vecchio stated that she will do that as well. Joslin Murphy stated that she thinks it is a question for Town Counsel and or the Town Treasurer. Alexandra Vecchio stated that she will check in with the legal team regarding the language and purpose of use, and she will then share this discussion with the Commissioner. Joslin Murphy asked Alexandra Vecchio if she could also ask the Assistant Town Administrator about using the personnel account temporarily. She thinks it is a temporary solution that would work well.

Alexandra Vecchio and the Trustees wished John all the best in his future endeavors and thanked him for all his hard work.

Adjourn

Joslin Murphy moved to adjourn. Seconded by Lisa Farber. All in favor. A roll call vote was taken.