Cemetery Commission Town of Halifax

A proposal to the Selectboard

Monday, 17 October, 2022

Proposal to Maintain and Improve the Cemeteries in Halifax

# Summary

Halifax has 22 cemeteries within its borders, all of which contain graves of historical significance (over 100 years old) but also significant to the families in the town whose loved ones have been laid to rest here. The town has consistently allocated a small annual budget to oversee the maintenance of the cemeteries which has covered the basic cost of mowing most of these graveyards. Generally, it has been up to the Cemetery Commissioners to oversee this work. For the past two years a small group of concerned citizens led by Andrea and Gary Rand and Linda Swanson have taken it upon themselves to restore the gravestones in the cemeteries. They have also catalogued the cemeteries and identified needs beyond general maintenance to ensure the town’s cemeteries remain safe and attractive. The current Cemetery Commissioners have therefore created a five-year plan to maintain and restore the cemeteries. Note, this proposal only covers physical improvements and does not address other necessary work such as updating the cemetery plot plans or determining where bodies are actually buried. So there is significant additional work that must be undertaken, but the physical condition of the cemeteries is critical and requires the town’s attention.

Over the five years of the project we have created, the total estimated cost is $131,357 as follows:



Funding for this project will require an increase in the annual allocation to the cemeteries, utilizing existing funds being held for the cemeteries, and seeking grants to offset the costs.

The Cemetery Commissioners request the Selectboard to review this proposal and advise on how best to proceed with this critical work to preserve the town’s inheritance.

# Description of Cemeteries

Halifax has 22 cemeteries containing 1920 known graves (see appendix A for a complete list).[[1]](#footnote-1),[[2]](#footnote-2) Eight are in current use (Halifax Center, Niles, West Halifax, Whitneyville, Pennel, Bell, Hatch, and Stanclift), all of which are on town land. Several other cemeteries that are no longer actively burying bodies are on private land but maintained by the town. There are other burials on private property that, while they may contain several graves, are not on town land and are maintained privately.

# Objectives of the Project

The project has 3 objectives:

1. Improve the state of the town’s cemeteries so that they can be enjoyed safely by the public and maintained regularly.
2. Undertake major restoration and expansion to ensure the town’s cemeteries are safely preserved and adequate to meet the town’s current and future needs for burials.
3. Establish a maintenance budget that accounts for inflation

## Improve the state of the town’s cemeteries

The town has been maintaining the town’s cemeteries mainly by mowing and trimming. While this maintenance has generally kept the appearance of the cemeteries acceptable, it has allowed larger issues to develop. These can be categorized as: trees, subsidence, and stone damage.

* **Trees:** In many cemeteries trees have been allowed to grow. This has led to a problem of roots possibly penetrating and disturbing graves, and gravestones being damaged by falling branches and/or falling trees. The trees also present a safety issue for the public visiting the cemeteries. This year, the Cemetery Commission has already removed several of the most dangerous trees and recommends continuing to remove trees over the five year period of this project. Thereafter, appropriate maintenance will prevent future trees from growing in the cemeteries. **Estimated cost over 5 years: $15,665**
* **Subsidence:** Over the course of decades, the earth where bodies have been buried subsides creating an uneven surface that make maintenance difficult. These subsided graves must be filled to ensure that regular mowing an occur. **Estimated cost over 5 years: $11,140**
* **Stone maintenance:** Through the years many of the grave markers in the town’s cemeteries have been damaged by falling tree limbs, storms and other events. Some have fallen and need to be re-seated in their bases; in other cases the stones themselves are broken and need to be repaired; in still other cases the stones need to be cleaned and preserved. Fortunately, a group of volunteers has been undertaking this work and has even raised funds to pay for supplies. We are including this in the budget to improve the state of the town’s cemeteries because it is a necessary task that will need to continue. It is also an example that private funds may be raised to offset some of the costs of this project. **Estimated cost over 5 years: $4,642**

## Undertake major restoration

In addition to ensuring the town’s cemeteries can be maintained, there is some major restoration work that will be required to ensure the cemeteries are safe and able to accommodate the town’s needs for burials. In order of priority, these include:

1. **Whitneyville Cemetery Tree Removal** – At least 30 mature trees must be removed from this cemetery. Some of the trees are growing among the graves and these stumps will need to be ground as they cannot be removed without disturbing the graves. **Estimated cost: $30,000**
2. **Niles Cemetery Expansion** – A section of the Niles Cemetery has been identified as the most appropriate for expansion. This will require clearing and installing drainage. **Estimated cost: $13,500**
3. **West Halifax Cemetery** – A donated piece of land has been cleared to expand this cemetery, but it requires drainage before it can be used. There is also a part of the cemetery where a retaining wall needs to be built to prevent graves sliding down the hill, allow for mowing, and ensure the integrity of this portion of the cemetery. **Estimated cost: $8,500**
4. **Pennel** – A section of this cemetery needs to be cleared to accommodate new graves. **Estimated cost: $11,000**
5. **Replace Gates/walls** – Several cemeteries, including Stafford and Hatch have gates that are no longer functional and must be replaced. In others walls need to be repaired to keep animals and vehicles out. **Estimated cost: $5,000**

These projects will be undertaken as funds are available in order of priority. The budget accounts for the restorations being completed in the order above over the five years of the project.

## Establish a maintenance budget that accounts for inflation

The town has transferred $5,000 annually to the cemetery fund for the purpose of maintenance. This is just sufficient for mowing and trimming (expenses for the 2022 summer mowing season totaled $4,971). Over time, inflation and the expansion of the cemeteries will require increased funding. We therefore propose a 5% increase in the town’s allocation to the cemetery fund over the coming five years. **Average annual cost: $6,382**

## Funding Request

Over five years the total estimated costs of this project are $131,357 as follows:



In addition to the town budget transfer (including inflation adjustment), part of this cost can be offset by other funds as follows in the total amount of **$48,911**:

* The cemetery fund has a balance from previous years of $12,664
* Nile cemetery has a fund in trust that currently has a balance of $1,800
* A cemetery trust fund has approximately $17,000 that can be liquidated (pending approval of trustee of public funds – there are additional stock certificates that may also be available but unknown at this time)
* The restoration committee has received donations of $1,458
* An estimated 3 plots per year will be sold at $200 each for a total of $3600



The unfunded portion of the budget for this project, then, is **$82,446** over the five years of the project as shown below:



We therefore request the Selectboard to commit to the following annual allocation to the cemetery fund for the completion of this project:

FY 2024: $18,691

FY2025: $19,476

FY 2026: $14,774

FY 2027: $17,588

FY 2028: $11,917

**TOTAL: $82,446**

This compares favorably with the cemetery budgets of neighboring towns:

Wilmington $42,000 per year

Readsboro: $32,645 (5 cemeteries)

Whitingham $20,550 per year

The cemetery commissioners are committed to applying for grants to cover the town’s portion, in whole or in part through a campaign to raise funds and at least one grant application per year.

# Conclusion

Halifax has a rich history and part of that history is found in the 22 cemeteries in town. These have been entrusted to the town for future generations. Halifax must invest today so that the children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and future residents can continue to enjoy this legacy. Otherwise, as we all know too well, the land will re-claim these sites and with them, a part of our history. The Cemetery Commissioners are prepared to do the work, we ask the town’s commitment to ensure the resources will be available.

Appendix A: Halifax Town Cemeteries



1. The historical records on numbers of people buried are not completely reliable so this is just an estimate based on *Find a Grave*, as more lost graves are uncovered they will be added and this number will grow. Thanks to Linda Swason for compiling this list. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There are also graves that have been created individually by citizens and these are not included in this figure. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)