

Racial Equity Pocket Questions – Westwood Cemetery

What are the racial impacts?

Records indicated the Westwood Cemetery was established in 1948. Cemeteries were segregated by race. Black residents were not allowed to be buried in the cemetery until 1968. The Town does not track the race of cemetery plot purchasers or of those interred on the site. Chapel Hill and Hillsborough have no more plots available meaning Carrboro's Westwood Cemetery is one of the few remaining locations that offer more affordable public burials in the area.

Nationally, it is reported that there has been a rising trend of cremations and other post-death practices. At the Westwood Cemetery, the cremated remains of up to three individuals are allowed within a single traditional burial plot. There remains a cultural component to traditional burials, and the visitation of burial sites that intersects race, place, and religion. Any changes to the use of the remaining unplotted area will need to consider the protection of the ongoing use of Westwood Cemetery, the dignity of funeral goers and subsequent visitors and all that accompanies this - grief and distress, honoring and celebrating lives passing on. Additional space for the cemetery use would allow for more diversity in post-death practices (ash spreading areas, natural burials, etc.)

The repurposing of the unplotted land could lead to new opportunities, depending on the new use, in relation to the site's proximity to downtown resources and nearby multi-family neighborhoods. If a use other than a cemetery is contemplated, visual and acoustic barriers would be warranted.

Who is or will experience burden?

If the Town retains the use, residents who have expressed interests in using the area for a different purpose would feel burdened. The Town would be burdened with enforcement of use of the space and its continued obligation of management of the Cemetery property.

If the Town were to alter the use of the land, cemetery visitors could be burdened by the new adjacent use. After the remaining plots are spoken for, residents would be burdened in finding places for traditional burials in both Carrboro and surrounding municipalities. Neighbors and others have reported that the use of the cemetery property for non-cemetery uses is disturbing and disrespectful and that rules for appropriate actions and behavior at the cemetery should be enforced.

Who is or will experience benefit?

If the Town retains the use, some residents in the short- and mid-term would have more space for traditional burials, in the long-term they would still be burdened when the site runs out of space. Others would benefit from the variety of interment methods the concept plan envisioned. Continued and expanded use of the cemetery, if priced similarly to the fees charged at present, would continue the availability of more affordable public burials, until the cemetery filled up once more. A mix of burial options for traditional and other methods is expected to extend the timeline of demand for traditional burial sites, as those interested in burial or scattering of cremated remains having those options available. The concept plan's inclusion of passive recreational features, such as a walking trail, reflection wall can provide space for residents seeking areas for such recreation and would allow some who are currently using the undeveloped portion of the cemetery property in ways they have been doing so already.

Further benefits to residents are heavily dependent on what types of new uses for the site would be, which could include affordable housing, open space, more intensive recreation space, etc.

What are the root causes of inequity?

Root causes of inequity can be related to governmental actions like land use planning that overlooks the interests of historically Black communities/communities. As stated previously, segregation contributed to historical exclusion from Westwood (and thus give a racial significance to current and future access to the cemetery). On a national scale land use decisions have often sited multi-family and affordable housing near less suitable adjacent units, or without access to recreative spaces—Carrboro has had both an open space and recreation requirement for subdivisions and multi-family developments that aims to ensure recreational needs can be met through a combination of public and private areas, amenities, and programs.

What might be the unintended consequences of this action or strategy?

If the Town retains the use, unintended consequences could be that residents who have been using the site for a different purpose would continue to do so, and the Town might have to mitigate this with some level of enforcement. Retention of the cemetery use also would require the Town to revisit the capacity issue later when the remaining area has been designated/plotted, and those plots are purchased.

An unintended consequence could be that the Town, if it decides to continue the provision of public cemetery space, but not at Westwood Cemetery, would need to find the funds to purchase vacant land in, or more likely around, Carrboro. The Town would need to contract a real-estate firm to find a site and may need to contract a consultant to conduct a suitability study of land. Additionally, depending on the market at the time a parcel was selected, the Town would have to determine how to raise the funds for such purchase (which could cause different unintended consequences based on the funding mechanism), as well as budget accordingly for the maintenance of property at some distance, possibly, from the remainder of the spaces publicly owned and managed in Town.