

July 27, 2015

Dear Members of the Burlington City Council,

The Chittenden County Historical Society (CCHS) has become aware that the City Council is considering a resolution to merge the Board of Cemetery Commissioners and the Board of Parks and Recreation Commissioners, presumably for the purpose of streamlining citizen input and saving money, since both park and cemetery functions (as well as others) fall within the same administrative unit in the City. At the 50th anniversary annual meeting of the CCHS, held on July 12, 2015, with 45 of our >150 members present, we discussed this proposal and unanimously voted to express our deep opposition to this action. All of us have valued the proud institution of cemetery commissions established in Vermont law and operating across the State. The volunteers making up these commissions are dedicated to preserving and beautifying their public cemeteries in order to preserve the dignity of these sacred spaces. They serve because they have a particular interest and focus on the burying places in their communities and ensuring that families have a quiet places of retreat to bury and remember their loved ones. They are not focused on recreational facilities, as vital as these also are to every community.

It is certainly true that cemeteries can serve passive recreational functions for walking, jogging, yoga or meditation, researching genealogy and history, enjoying horticulture, even quiet picnics. But it is understood by all that these activities are secondary to the primary purpose and should never take precedence over private graveside services, burials, family visits and patriotic commemorations. The Burlington cemeteries (Greenmount ~ 1790, Elmwood 1801, and Lake View 1867) literally "embody" our history. They developed within the tradition of "garden cemeteries" begun at Mt. Auburn near Boston in 1831 and soon cities, especially in the northeast, were laying out paths, drives and lavish plantings as well as architectural features, to make their cemeteries inviting places for the living and the dead. Active recreation, contests, food concessions and the like, have no place in our cemeteries. We have parks for that and need park commissioners to focus on those distinct activities.

Parks and Recreation commissioners are bound to have their focus on bicycle paths, hiking trails, community events and festivals, waterfront activities, camping, ball fields etc. These are qualitatively different from the preoccupations of a cemetery commission. Please do not compromise the unique stewardship responsibility of the Cemetery Commission. They only meet a few times a year. Surely their elimination will not save meaningful money. This false economy will assure that less attention is paid to the rightful primary purpose of the cemeteries as well-kept, beautiful and tranquil places for our forbears, and eventually ourselves, to rest.

Sincerely,