

# Cemetery Precision

Geographic Information System Put to Use in Local Cemeteries

By Tony Brown - Maryville Daily Forum

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Where will you spend eternity?

For most people, theologically speaking, the location may be open to debate. But for those planning to have a plot at Oak Hills Cemetery, the city of Maryville's municipal burial grounds, it's a question — at least in the physical realm — that can be answered with considerable precision.

In fact, City Clerk Sheila Smail can even provide you with a legal description.



For almost a year the local firm of Midland Surveying Inc. has been working to record each of the cemetery's more than 10,000 occupied, reserved and empty plots in order to create a computerized geographic information system (GIS) database and interactive map.

City staff who access the map on their computer screens see outlines of each of the cemetery's 10 additions filled with small rectangles representing individual plots, which are colored gray for open, pink of occupied and purple for reserved.

A couple of more mouse clicks open up a text box containing information about individual grave sites, including the decedent's date of birth, date of death, age at death and a legal description detailing the grave's exact location. Push another button, and the screen displays a photo of the tombstone.

Smail said the GIS map is a vast improvement over the old system, in place for decades, that consisted of making hand-written entries about each burial into large ledger books. The city plans to continue updating the books "for historical reasons," Smail said. But the new database provides a vastly more efficient tool for reserving plots and answering questions from genealogy buffs and families who have lost track of great-great-great Uncle Edward.

"City staff is delighted to have these capabilities to assist citizens with such ease, especially during difficult times," said Smail, who added that access to the map and database is currently limited to staff, but that the city hopes at some point to make these resources available to the public via its Web site.

The system is already saving staff hours and shortening the time it takes to respond to requests for information, Smail said. In addition to assisting local residents wishing to reserve plots, she said her office frequently receives queries from "all over the United States" from people doing genealogy research or families who have driven to Maryville to view a love one's grave..

John Steins, who is responsible for maintenance and upkeep at Oak Hills, is being provided with a computer that will allow him to access the cemetery map from his office. Smail said Steins is available to meet with people at the cemetery who are seeking to reserve a plot or who need assistance locating a grave site.

"This is going to save time, and it is just a lot easier to access where people are at," Smail said. "We're really excited about it, and it's going to be a great asset for us."

***To request information about grave sites and available plots, call the Maryville City Clerk's office at (660) 562-8003.***

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