

SUGGESTIONS FOR ESTABLISHING A COUNTY CEMETERY COMMISSION

1. Identify the need in your county for a commission.
2. Call a meeting of interested persons and present your ideas. Select a chairperson and any other officers you think your committee will need. Division of responsibilities will save time and prevent duplicated effort.
3. Locate and identify all known cemeteries in your county. Visit each cemetery and prepare a brief condition statement. Take photos to document your findings. The county DOT map, which may be obtained from your county engineering office, will show many of the cemetery sites.
4. On the DOT map identify all cemeteries, and conspicuously mark those which are endangered. If they are to be saved from obliteration caused by gross neglect, desecration and vandalism, or encroachment, immediate action is necessary. Display the map in a public place where it can be seen by as many county residents as possible.
5. Ask your local newspaper to run articles on the cemeteries which are endangered. Try to work in quotations from local citizens who are interested in the preservation of historic areas. The presence of the body of a veteran in an endangered cemetery could be used to involve local patriotic organizations in your committee.
6. Seek the support of local funeral directors, monument companies, genealogical and historical societies, conservationists, preservationists, and anyone else who has an interest in cemeteries.
7. Talk about the idea of a commission with anyone who will listen. Emphasize the positive values which a cemetery commission will provide. These include preservation, conservation, education, public good will, increased tourism, and the saving of money and effort by providing a centralized agency which can answer questions concerning cemetery maintenance, preservation, and history. A cemetery commission can provide a forum for the resolution of cemetery disputes in a cooperative and harmonious atmosphere. This can prevent long lasting hard feelings and costly litigation.
8. Prepare a report of cemetery conditions and place copies with each supervisor and other elected county officers, newspapers, public libraries, etc. You can summarize the report in a one sheet hand-out for general distribution.
9. Appoint a small committee of articulate individuals to present the report and recommendations to the supervisors. Stress the theme of cooperation with trustees and supervisors to help them fulfill their cemetery responsibilities more easily. Stress that the cost to the cemetery can be very small. Possibly the county could provide copying privileges, paper, postage, etc. Do not make a budget appropriation a requirement, but also do not refuse any help offered.
10. Persons suggested for appointment to the commission must be vitally interested in cemetery preservation, and they must be willing and able to devote considerable time to the work of the commission. All geographic areas of the county should be represented, either by a resident of, or by someone interested in, each county area. Seven members is a workable number for a commission. You may wish to ask additional individuals to serve on an advisory panel once you are organized.

11. Your primary responsibility will be to work with township and county officials, but you should also ask for the support of the cemetery associations in your county, since you will probably be asked to assist them with their cemetery problems.

12. There are monetary costs involved which will need to be shouldered by your committee and supporters. These can be kept to a minimum if you can get free access to a copying machine.

If you have questions or need additional suggestions you may contact:

Jasper County Cemetery Commission
Box 944
Newton, IA 50208

Louisa County Cemetery Commission
307 Flat Iron Drive
Columbus Junction, IA 52738

Jackson County Cemetery Commission
Maquoketa, IA 52060

POSSIBLE GOALS FOR YOUR COUNTY CEMETERY COMMISSION

1. Locate deeds covering all lands on which cemeteries are located and determine from these deeds the responsibility for maintenance of the cemeteries.
2. Help to establish minimum standards for the maintenance of the township cemeteries. These standards should cover mowing, fences and gates, brush and weed removal, stone repair, etc.
3. Work to encourage interested citizens in helping the trustees with maintenance and improvement of cemeteries.
4. Promote public awareness of the problems facing cemeteries. Programs could be developed which could be presented to civic and social organizations telling the stories of some of the cemeteries and the problems which exist.
5. Establish a county burial register which will list all burials made in all of the cemeteries in the county. This might be accomplished by assisting the local genealogical society with the recording of existing burials and then keep an accurate list of subsequent burials.
6. Work with the township trustees to prepare standardized cemetery records.
7. Assist the trustees in determining improvements which are necessary in the individual cemeteries.
8. Establish, in the county court house, a collection of copies of all cemetery records. This is especially important since many records have already been lost through fire and carelessness. The collection of records could include burial registers, lot ownership records, plats, deeds, and any other items pertaining to the cemeteries.
9. Establish procedures for investigating inquiries about cemeteries and establish procedures for finding amicable resolutions of controversies which may arise in the operation and maintenance of cemeteries.
10. Encourage the erection of signs or markers identifying all cemeteries by name. Civic groups could be encouraged to participate in this project.
11. Prepare a list of persons with special skills who are interested in assisting with stone repair, fence building, landscaping, and other projects.
12. Compile and print a map showing the location of each cemetery in the county. The map could be distributed by the commission, county offices, and county tourism organizations.
13. Compile a directory of all cemeteries and known burial sites. The directory should include township maps, size of cemetery in acres, date of establishment, responsibility for maintenance, location, condition of fences, grounds, and memorials, and approximate number of burials.
14. Encourage Grange, Scout, 4H, FFA, and other organizations to "adopt" a cemetery and assist with maintenance. In some cases the township trustees will provide some or all of the funding necessary.
15. Promote neighborhood watches for cemeteries. Unusual activity should be reported to the county sheriff.

16. Encourage teachers to use the cemeteries as classrooms. Students who are exposed to the importance of cemeteries are much less likely to become vandals.

17. Consider additional uses which will help make the public aware of the value of cemeteries as an important part of our heritage. These uses could include sponsoring walking tours of the cemeteries, encouraging the visiting of cemeteries as part of family reunions, and the establishment of picnic areas adjacent to the cemeteries. Cemeteries which are visited often by people for legitimate reasons are less likely to be vandalized.