

Cemetery investigation continues

Riverview Gardens awaiting repairs

By TERRI SANGINITI
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The grass at Riverview Gardens cemetery, which prompted angry calls to city and state officials from people with relatives buried there, has been cut.

But the wrought-iron fence and gate that disappeared along the cemetery's North Market Street side have yet to see repairs.

City officials said the summer's dry weather prevented the grass from becoming an overgrown tangle of weeds, leaving city inspectors no reason to further cite the cemetery's owner, the Rev. Tom C. Davis, pastor of the Restoration Christian Fellowship Church.

"What worked in his favor was the dry weather," said Wilmington Communications Director John Rago.

The city has set an Oct. 25 court date for Davis to answer charges from last year that include complaints about high grass and weeds, the broken fence and gates, and removal of refuse and trash.

No date has been set for Davis to answer additional code enforcement citations issued in April and June of this year, Rago said.

While Davis awaits next month's hearing, the state Attorney General's Office is continuing its investigation into the cemetery's accounting records and proposed maintenance plan.

Davis, who would not comment, took over operations of the troubled nonprofit Riverview Cemetery in early 2003.

He acquired the graveyard for \$1 after the former owners had to file for bankruptcy. At that point, a perpetual-care fund had been depleted, and officials were keeping poor burial records and neglecting mainte-

Riverview: Owner doesn't answer letters, phone calls

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nance. Some bodies buried at the cemetery had been misplaced.

Davis was given \$150,000 by the former owners, Independent Order of Odd Fellows Grand Lodge, Lodges No. 1 and No. 34 and the Knights of Pythias Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, who abandoned the cemetery in 2001.

Davis was authorized to use the money for a trust fund for operating expenses and capital improvements. He changed the cemetery's name to Riverview Gardens.

Finances investigated

A preliminary investigation indicates that Davis used some of the trust money to purchase new lawn maintenance equipment.

Attorney General's Office spokeswoman Lori Sitler said investigators visited the site and found the grounds maintained.

"At this point, our investigator

is still looking at receipts and invoices for office space rental, equipment and administrative salaries," she said.

Sitler said Davis had to rent space at the church for the cemetery records, because the office on the cemetery grounds had suffered extensive water damage.

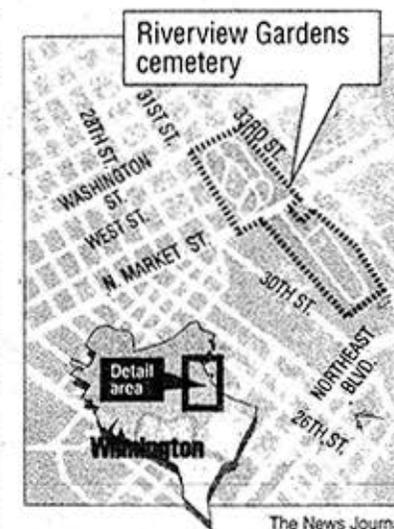
Former cemetery manager Walt Mateja confirmed that no lawn-care equipment was transferred to Davis when the minister acquired the cemetery, because all the equipment had been seized.

The weed-trimmers, mowers, leaf blowers and chain saws replaced after a May 2000 garage fire on the premises were stored in a rental trailer that was later taken for nonpayment during the fraternal order's bankruptcy proceedings.

"There was probably \$20,000 to \$30,000 worth of equipment in there," Mateja said last week. "When we filed for bankruptcy, the company took the trailers."

Although many plot owners have continued to complain that Davis does not return their calls, that isn't a crime, according to authorities.

"It may be a breach of his con-



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tract with plot owners and then they would have to bring private suit," Deputy Attorney General Judy Hodas said.

Requests for information ignored

Author Lee Anderson, who just published the book "Riverview Cemetery: Reading the Stones," said she had tried unsuccessfully several times over the past few years to contact Davis for input for her book.

He even ignored her certified letter, Anderson said.

"I've tried for three years," she said. "Two or three times a year I would call. It's common courtesy to return a call."

Historical Society of Delaware research librarian Ed Chichirichi said he, too, attempted to reach Davis by mail.

Chichirichi said in a March 2005 letter that he offered to photocopy all of the cemetery's records on his own time and return them to Davis so the duplicate records could be part of the historical society's permanent genealogy collection. Plot owners would then be able to look up the information at the Historical Society that they have been unsuccessful in getting from the cemetery owner.

"He ignored my letter, too," Chichirichi said. "I never received the courtesy of a reply."

"I thought it would be a great public service," he said. "And I found it curious not to hear back from him."

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The Rev. Tom C. Davis