

Residents scramble to save cemetery

Group aims to finance landscaping for historical and troubled Riverview

By **TERRI SANGINITI**
Staff reporter

A community group is trying to find ways to help the historical and financially troubled Riverview Cemetery in Wilmington.

Residents met last week with the cemetery's Board of Trustees to try to come up with a plan for making landscaping and other improvements while looking for money sources.

People with family and friends buried in the cemetery have complained that it is overgrown and that in some cases they have been unable to locate grave sites.

Brandywine Historical Society President James R. Hanby, head of the newly formed Friends of Riverview, suggested the cemetery try to get listed on

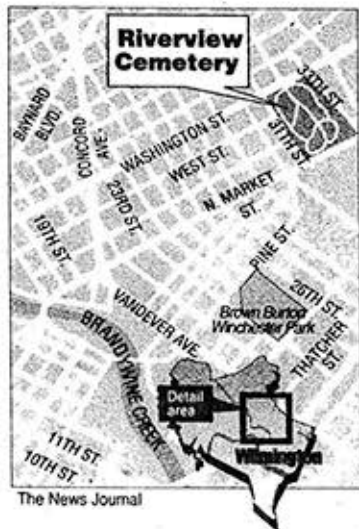
the National Register of Historic Places and seek funding from local corporations.

Hanby organized a June 17 cleanup of the cemetery using community volunteers. Another community cleanup is planned for July 29.

The cemetery also could appeal for city funding, Carolyn Martin, a representative for Wilmington Mayor James H. Sills Jr., told a meeting of cemetery supporters Wednesday.

Lawrence A. Sturgis Sr., president of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, said the city's public-works budget also could be tapped for trash removal and badly needed repaving.

The nonprofit cemetery at 33rd and North Market streets was founded in 1872 by the Grand Lodge of the Knights of Pythias and the Independent



Order of Odd Fellows, which still runs it.

But in the last 15 years, the number of burials at Riverview have plummeted from 314 in 1985 to 134 last year. The struggling cemetery needs 180 burials a year to meet operating costs, said Walt Mateja, the cemetery's

volunteer executive director. That leaves no room for capital improvements, he said.

The cemetery operated at a loss of \$101,280 last year and is projected to lose \$146,764 this year, Mateja said.

"We do care about the cemetery. We've just been overwhelmed for a long time," Mateja said. "Expenses are going up, and the number of burials have been declining, and it's getting overwhelming for the Knights of Pythias."

More than 100 people attended a June 10 meeting on the cemetery hosted by state Sen. Harris McDowell III, D-Wilmington North. Many complained about high weeds and piles of dirt. Others said they could not find loved ones' graves.

The state Attorney General's Office is investigating, Deputy Attorney General Olha Rybakoff said.

"There has been a steady stream of complaints, and that speaks volumes," Rybakoff said.

After McDowell's meeting, state lawmakers announced plans to establish a cemetery preservation task force "to research and review the conditions of Delaware's cemeteries."

"We're going to try and set forth guidelines on how cemeteries are to operate," said Dave Bonar, administrative assistant to the majority caucus.

Bill Singly of Dover, whose parents are buried in Riverview, blamed the worsening condition on "a lot of well-meaning individuals who had no experience in landscaping and have allowed it to deteriorate to the condition it is now."

Richard Boates, of the Grand Lodge of the Knights of Pythias, acknowledged that the cemetery does not use professional groundskeepers.

"We are a charity," Boates said. "We don't have professionals. So when you ask a volunteer you accept their errors."

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