

Riverview Cemetery ceases operations

By **TERRI SANGINITI**
Staff reporter

The 129-year-old Riverview Cemetery in Wilmington effectively ceased operations Wednesday after trustees said they had only \$50 left in a checking account and cannot pay groundskeepers.

Funeral home directors will have to arrange future burials at the 87-acre cemetery, which was targeted earlier this year by the state Attorney General's Office in a consumer fraud lawsuit.

A volunteer trustee will

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respond to messages left on the cemetery's answering machine, but Riverview will have no way to maintain its 87 acres and 36,000 graves, trustees said.

"We're about as low as we can go," said Winfield Lane, the cemetery's board

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Cemetery: Takeover deal fell through

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of trustees' president.

A deal that would have turned over ownership of the cemetery for free to a Pennsylvania company willing to assume its liabilities fell through Tuesday, trustees said. Deputy Attorney General Ohla Rybacoff said she would consider asking for a temporary court order stopping the closure.

"It's very disturbing that they are leaving this property unattended," Rybacoff said. "That's a green light for vandals."

The state Attorney General's Office filed a motion in Chancery Court on Tuesday to expedite civil consumer fraud proceedings begun Jan. 31 against the cemetery and its owners.

A search for a casket missing for two years is continuing despite the closure.

The nonprofit cemetery at 33rd and North Market streets is owned by the Independent Order of Odd Fellows Lodges 1 and 34, and the Knights of Pythias Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania.

All have suffered from declining membership in recent years.

The cemetery's perpetual-care fund has plummeted from \$100,000 in the past five years as burials have dropped dramatically.

"We need 17 burials [a month] to break even," board vice-president David Savin said. "We only got two burials in April."

Tom Subers, of the Knights of Pythias Grand Lodge in Pennsylvania, said they are still

exploring "alternate means to upkeep the grounds."

Oliver Bair Enterprises in Upper Darby, Pa., had considered taking over the cemetery, but decided it was not economically feasible, Bair chairman Mayor H. McKinley said in a letter to the state Tuesday.

McKinley could not be reached.

Riverview director Walt Mateja said Oliver Bair spent about \$8,000 investigating the deal before deciding it couldn't

work. Mateja said he was sad to step down Wednesday from the volunteer post he has held for the last four years.

"All the good we've tried to do has gotten lost by the wayside," he said.

New board member James Hanby said he would answer messages and help people find graves.

"Just because we're struggling to pay the electric, doesn't mean people don't have to be

served," Mateja said. Investigators hired by the Odd Fellows' lodges have been searching for the casket of retired autoworker Melvin Allen. That search so far has revealed that at least two more caskets were buried in the wrong graves and that another is missing.

Wilmington and state officials said they would be unable to help the cemetery.

"Any help would have to come out of Parks and Recreation, and we're already short-staffed and the overtime is deleted for the fiscal year," city spokesman John Rago said. "We'd like to step forward and do something, but we can't."

Cutting grass at the cemetery

costs about \$7,000 a year. "We have to find some way to revive the operation and get it back in good shape," said State Sen. Harris B. McDowell III, D-Wilmington North. "The only way to do that is with an infusion of capital from somewhere, but where do you find that?"

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