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10240 Harvest Fields Drive
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SB 0647 Testimony: FAVORABLE

Sponsor: Senator Ellis

My name is Candy Warden. I am President of the Rosa Bonheur Society, Inc., a volunteer, nonprofit group formed in 2007 to protect and preserve the Rosa Bonheur Memorial Park, a Maryland human and pet cemetery with thousands of burials. The people with loved ones resting at our cemetery span across all the counties of Maryland.

In having over 16 years of experience of cemetery work both with the Rosa Bonheur Society, Inc. and the Coalition to Protect Maryland Burial Sites I am very aware of the impact of abandoned cemeteries on the families concerned and the communities in which they are located.

The Problem

Cemeteries require regular maintenance and repairs, such as, repairing and cleaning memorials, replacing and/or repairing broken fences, filling sunken and eroded areas, lawn mowing, and landscape care. There are also the effects of vandalism and other wanton destruction, which also need to be addressed. The following are several examples of abandoned cemeteries in various counties:

The Magruder Family cemetery in Prince George's county is overgrown and under-maintained due to lack of clear ownership and regular maintenance.

In Anne Arundel County there are over 30 cemeteries identified as abandoned with most being overgrown with vegetation and many being used as trash dumps and parking lots.

Harford County is home to Johnson-Hill Cemetery where the developer that owns the property denies ownership, so the cemetery has fallen into a state of thorough neglect and most of the headstones have been broken.

In Howard County in a Valley Mede neighborhood (formerly the Arcadia Estate) there is nestled in a wooded area thick with thistle and high grass an abandoned cemetery that has been neglected for years. The stone wall has fallen in, there are smashed headstones, fallen monuments, and open sarcophagi. Ownership is unknown as the developer that built the surrounding homes has moved on.

Abandoned cemeteries may range from one grave to thousands of graves as in the case of Baltimore County's Zion Cemetery. When the owner Warren Harmis passed away it was discovered that he had misrepresented the cemetery as belonging to the AME church to avoid paying taxes. As the cemetery falls into ruin with broken headstones, collapsing burial locations, overgrown grass and weeds, etc. no one knows who owns it.

Benefits of SB 0647

By establishing an Abandoned Cemeteries Fund and check-off on individual income tax returns for voluntary contributions to the fund administered by the Secretary working with the Maryland Office of Cemetery Oversight to distribute those funds the important issues facing abandoned cemeteries would receive widespread recognition and much needed relief would be provided for the citizens and communities of the State of Maryland.

SB 0647 would make it possible for communities and non-profit organizations to obtain funding that is not otherwise available to them since they lack ownership.

SB 0647 would help sustain ongoing efforts and perhaps inspire new efforts to preserve and protect abandoned cemeteries by offering fiscal and official support for those endeavors.

Protected and preserved abandoned cemeteries that are maintained by communities and non-profits will not only beautify and make neighborhoods safer, but also offer opportunities for people to become actively engaged in contributing to the well being of their specific community.

There is also a lot of history important to the future of Maryland to be found in abandoned cemeteries across the State of Maryland. It is by knowing the past that we learn lessons that help us grow in the understanding of life and the contributions of our ancestors that have made our present lives possible. Providing funding for these cemeteries allows for the protection of our heritage and the study of those individuals found in endangered cemeteries. There is much to learn, but we need access to preserved and protected cemeteries that celebrate the contributions of all people including enslaved peoples, freed people, and those of other diverse socio-cultural, ethical, and religious backgrounds.

SB 0647 will provide all of these benefits for the constituents of the State of Maryland.