

Testimony of David Zinner for the Senate Finance Committee – February 16, 2024 in favor of SB 647

My name is David Zinner. I'm been a member of the Maryland Advisory Council for Cemetery Oversight (ACCO) for 12 years though my testimony today is not as a representative of the Council. I'm also the coordinator of PRINCE, the Preservation and Rehabilitation Initiative for Neglected Cemetery Entities.

For many years, from every county in Maryland, we've heard complaints, concern and anguish about the condition of abandoned and severely neglected cemeteries. Abandoned cemeteries are an eyesore and show disrespect. They can become a burden for neighbors and municipalities.

This is not a new problem. Back In 2005 the ACCO received a recommendation from Legislative Services to study the issue of abandoned and neglected cemeteries with the intention of developing legislation to address the issue. In 2009 legislation was introduced, but not passed.

Over the last 5 years, the Office of Cemetery Oversight has worked closely with PRINCE, to bring prison work crews to work at cemeteries in need.

Last year, a joint effort of the Office of Cemetery Oversight and Workforce Development, delivered a cemetery maintenance training program taught in the prison to incarcerated citizens.

This year PRINCE is working on placing trained and experience incarcerated citizens in work release jobs in cemeteries.

We've learned a lot and we're ready to bring PRINCE's experience to address the state-wide problem of abandoned Maryland cemeteries. That is why we are excited to support SB 647. The bill takes a giant step towards addressing the problem of abandoned cemeteries. It will also raise awareness of this problem across the state of Maryland.

Notice the tax checkoff portion does not go into effect until taxes are due for the year 2026 with an estimate of funds not being received until sometime in 2027.

However, there is much work to do to get the fund structure up and running.

- Explore the definition of abandoned cemetery and make sure it includes cemeteries that are severely neglected.
- Reach out to every county in Maryland and hear their assessment of abandoned cemeteries. County and municipal governments will play a critical role in this effort.
- Hear more about the efforts of other states in maintaining abandoned and neglected cemeteries.
- Meet with companies that have cemetery expertise
- Learn more about the PRINCE project working with incarcerated citizens
- Develop guidelines to apply for grants
- Identify additional private and governmental funding sources and incentive programs
- Look at models of partnerships between private entities, non-profit organizations and abandoned cemeteries

Please support SB 647