

Candy Warden, President

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HB 0535 Testimony: FAVORABLE

Sponsors: Delegates Simmons, A. Johnson, Taylor, and Tomlinson,

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 17 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 neglected and 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 known as "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 a single 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 HB 0535

The plight of abandoned cemeteries would receive widespread recognition.

Communities and non-profit organizations could obtain funding not otherwise available to them due to lack ownership.

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.

Neighborhoods will become safer.

Protection of our history and heritage. 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.

Benefits of Increasing the Number of Tax Check-off Items

Consumer Choice Studies:

Research cited by the Chesapeake Bay Trust (HB 0828 testimony, 2024) was conducted by Barry Schwartz (2004). Findings indicated that when six jars of jam were available 30% of subjects bought a jar and when 24 were available 3% of subjects bought a jar. Schwartz used six choices in his smaller choice sample of jams indicating that six choices are not a large or dissatisfying amount of choices. An optimal number of choices was not sought by nor identified by the findings of this study.

Schwartz stated "Research needs to become more nuanced to find the number that can optimize people's happiness".

In a subsequent study conducted by Reuskaja, Cheek, Iyengar, and Schwartz (2022) with over 7,000 participants from six countries findings indicated that it is often more harmful to have too few options than too many. The study also acknowledged that there are many factors that can influence decision making that need to be investigated. No optimal choice number was investigated or identified.

Charitable Donations Choice Studies:

Feherova et al. (2022) found that in contexts where people can choose how many recipients to help that increasing the number of recipients that can be selected increases donation frequency.

Lindkvist and Luke (2022) found that offering more charitable organizations to choose from did not negatively affect donation behavior. People can choose between altruistic actions that can help varying numbers of recipients, and this choice can increase the motivation of people to donate. In this study between 2 to 80 choices of charitable organizations were offered to subjects to select from.

Summary of Research Findings:

Charitable donation research indicates that offering more choices of donation recipients increases the frequency of donations.

Consumer products research indicates that is more harmful to have too few options than too many.

Conclusion:

The research reviewed indicates that more donation recipient choices are more likely to result in increased donations and that greater satisfaction is experienced by people when they have a significant number of options to choose from. The tax check-off currently has five donation recipient choices. It is imperative that more donation recipient choices be offered through the tax check-off in order to establish and provide fiscal support for the Abandoned Cemeteries Fund and for all of the organizations listed to benefit from increased donations.

*My review of this research is based on personal experience as an M.A. in Psychology with a focus on cognitive processing and work on research for treatment decision making in breast cancer patients.

Thank you for your kind consideration of this testimony, which is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Candy Warden

Rosa Bonheur Society, Inc. (founded May 2007)

2010 Periwinkle Award Winner, Coalition to Protect Maryland Burial Sites

References:

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