

Candy Warden, President

Rosa Bonheur Society, Inc.

10240 Harvest Fields Drive

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HB 0724 Testimony: FAVORABLE

Sponsor: Delegates Simmons, Hill, Roberts, Taylor, and Woods,

My name is Candy Warden. I am President of the Rosa Bonheur Society, Inc. (RBS), 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.

The Rosa Bonheur Memorial Park was founded as a pet cemetery in 1935. This world renowned cemetery was operated and managed effectively and efficiently until 1979 when a developer, William Green, acquired ownership. During Mr. Green's tenure burials began to include those of human beings in addition to pets. Mr. Green made plans to develop on the cemetery grounds, but the cemetery ended up in receivership due to fiscal malfeasance. Since 1997 the cemetery has been owned by a succession of developers that all wanted to develop on the cemetery grounds. The result has been decades of severe neglect by owners of the cemetery buildings, entry wall, landscaping, burials, etc. Our volunteer group has provided maintenance for approximately 18 years without having accepted a single cash donation. If there is a project that requires an investment we pay for it ourselves as we know that those with loved ones buried at the cemetery have been taken advantage of emotionally and fiscally by the owners over the years.

In December 2023, the assault on the cemetery escalated from chronic, calculated neglect to desecration. The week before Christmas, the Rosa Bonheur Memorial Park suffered catastrophic removal and desecration of human and pet remains.

Graves were desecrated with human remains being exhumed and relocated without the permission of families and without the direction of a funeral services professional. Pet graves were also wantonly destroyed that surrounded the human graves.

The families that suffered disinterment(s) have never been notified of the location of their loved ones' remains by the desecrator(s). Are the human remains still extant? Have they been dumped in a mass grave somewhere? Have they been thrown away? Were the remains only partially exhumed or churned into the ground? Only the desecrator(s) know the answers to these questions.

Although families paid significant amounts of money for plots, caskets, vaults, memorial markers, and other services for human and pet burials and received deeds for their plots they have been victimized by their loved ones being violated.

Who is responsible for this desecration and damage? A developer that our group met with for three years in an effort to reach a mutual agreement to protect the cemetery. The developer believes that the removal of human remains will open the way for him to build on the cemetery grounds. The pet burials would just be plowed under even though the majority of the people that own the plots are still alive. The developer is hiding behind LLCs, which even the Maryland Office of Cemetery Oversight has yet to untangle. It has been over a year since these tragic events were perpetrated and the person(s) responsible have not been legally identified; just the LLCs.

How could such a tragedy occur? There is no established Commission on Abandoned and Neglected Maryland Cemeteries. The Office of Cemetery Oversight mainly regulates operating cemeteries. The Maryland Historic Trust focuses on cemeteries that meet their criteria of “historic”, which does not include all cemeteries over 50 years old. What entity is providing oversight specifically for abandoned and neglected cemeteries? None. This is unacceptable considering the significant number of abandoned and neglected cemeteries in Maryland. Families, communities, friends groups, and individuals in interest are without an expert resource to provide the guidance and support needed to address a multitude of issues.

Benefits of HB 0724 for Abandoned and Neglected Cemeteries:

- Oversight
- Ownership
- Accountability
- Preservation
- Protection

Remains interred in cemeteries must at all times be treated with honor, dignity, and respect. These beliefs are normative and widely held by constituents across Maryland. The proposed legislation is critical for the protection of all Maryland gravesites as the establishment of a Commission on Abandoned and Neglected Maryland Cemeteries would not only serve to protect the abandoned and neglected cemeteries of today, but those that will arise in the future.

Thank you for your 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