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## Sandy Spring averts a cemetery crisis

Community graveyards operating without licenses will be allowed to remain open while legal affairs are put in order

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Members of the Sandy Spring Civic Association got a scare Monday night when they learned that the state had ordered a stop to all burials and maintenance at two community cemeteries that date back to the 1800s.

But an immediate crisis was averted when Del. Karen S. Montgomery (D-Dist. 14) of Brookeville, who attended the meeting, intervened and garnered a temporary reprieve for the cemeteries.

Civic association President Thene Martin Murnick told the 20 people who attended the meeting that a letter sent by the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation to Snowden Funeral Home of Rockville in mid-June indicated that Ash Memorial Cemetery, in the 18700 block of Chandlee Mill Road in Sandy Spring, was not in compliance with a 1997 regulation requiring all cemeteries to be licensed by the state.

A quick check revealed that Mutual Memorial Cemetery, in the 18300 block of Brooke Road in Sandy Spring, was not licensed either, Murnick said.

Without a license, all maintenance and burials at the cemeteries were effectively stopped, he said.

“Most of the people buried at those cemeteries are descendants of slaves,” said Joy Turner, former president and community outreach director of the civic association. “It’s a family that’s there. It’s more than a cemetery, it’s history.”

Montgomery on Tuesday morning called George A. Piendak, director of the Office of Cemetery Oversight, who is on extended leave, and arranged for burials and maintenance to be allowed at both cemeteries until licenses are obtained.

“He said we want you to do it well, we want you to do it correctly,” Montgomery said. “Don’t rush, just keep maintaining the cemetery and burying people there. Nothing will happen. Nothing will come crashing down.”

Emotions ran high at the civic association meeting. Many residents who have lived in the small community their whole lives feared they would not be able to care for the family plots where several generations of their ancestors are buried.

Mutual Memorial was operated as a family cemetery, with plots sold to the descendants of the original trustees in the 1800s. According to the Montgomery County Planning Board Historic Preservation Web site, Ash Memorial is listed as a community cemetery and Mutual Memorial is listed as a religious cemetery.

Residents wondered why, after 10 years of the regulation being in place with no one raising the issue, the regulation is being enforced now.

Acting Director of the Office of Cemetery Oversight Patricia F. Tress on Tuesday said a resident of Sandy Spring called to report that Ash Memorial was unlicensed, and a letter was subsequently sent to Snowden Funeral Home, which maintains the cemetery.

At Monday’s meeting, some suggested that as Maryland tightens its financial belt, it was cracking down on collecting every licensing fee that it could.

“What this has to do with is the state needs all the money it can get,” Montgomery said Monday.

Possible solutions weighed Monday night included reviving an incorporated organization called the Beautification Club that operated Ash Memorial beginning in 1953, but lapsed after all of its members passed away. The civic association might also find volunteers to mow the grass and maintain the cemeteries. Forming a new corporation is also being considered.

According to the Office of Cemetery Oversight’s Web site, “A corporation, limited liability company or partnership must obtain a permit issued by the Office of Cemetery Oversight before the business may operate a cemetery or burial goods business in Maryland.”

“There will be some costs involved,” Turner said.

The civic association is searching for lawyers who would be willing to offer pro bono assistance, she added.

The Office of Cemetery Oversight was created in 1997 under the regulatory authority of the Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation, according to its Web site.