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Oakwood City Cemetery to go digital

City contract with Georgia Mountains Regional Commission will provide electronic maps, records

It's a creepy job, but somebody has to do it.

Oakwood has contracted with the Gainesville-based Georgia Mountains Regional Commission for mapping and data management work at the 4-acre City Cemetery, including boring into the ground for unmarked graves.

“This is something that we have held off on for a couple of years because of the cost factor,” City Manager Stan Brown said. “But every day, as we end up with less and less room ... we continue to find issues (of matching) what we have on paper ... (to) what have in the field.

“What we need to do is get a good mapping of the cemetery, assess what we have left in terms of spaces ... and put some old data in an electronic format.”

Brown said the city has some old maps that “if we're not careful, if you fold and unfold them, they would disintegrate in our hands.”

The city first considered mapping work at the cemetery off Plainview Road and across from Oak Street three years ago.

The need to address some issues, particularly “having to basically try to stop people from being buried in the wrong spot,” has increased recently, Brown said.

Faith Bryan, GMRC's director of information services, said the agency documents “every visible headstone,” recording date of birth and death, military history and other key identifying information.

“We also take a picture of the headstone and tie that back to the GPS point,” she said. “This way, (the city) will have a digital map and digital records.”

GMRC has done or is doing similar work at cemeteries in other cities, such as Dahlonega and Toccoa.

According to the agreement, approved Monday by City Council at an \$18,000 cost, GMRC staff also will conduct preliminary tests within the cemetery's oldest section to determine the location of unmarked graves.

“A lot of people use ground-penetrating radar, but we don't have nearly the funding to cover that (expense),” Bryan said.

The work is done, instead, with a probing rod, which can plunge deep into the soil.

“By the feel of the ground, they determine whether there’s a body there or not,” Bryan said.

All in all, the work “is a little bit creepy, especially if you do your research on ghost sightings,” she said, with a laugh.

Once the project is completed, Brown said, “we’ll look at how to develop the rest of the property for additional plots.”