



To: Mayor and City Council
From: Dylan Mulfinger, City Administrator
Subject: Cemetery Work Session
Date: 9/14/2026

In 2024 the city council voted to raise fees for the cemetery. This has allowed the cemetery to break even each year as the city sells graves and digs graves. The issue is that selling of the graves and digging will end and the cemetery will no longer generate revenue. The cost of the cemetery will be completely absorbed by property taxes. The cemetery was offset by property taxes for many years because the cost of maintaining the cemetery has only increased.

The state of Iowa has anticipated this issue and required a perpetual care fund for cemeteries so that the cost of the cemetery does not fall as a burden to the next owner. There are a couple of issues with this process. The first is that the perpetual care requirement is nowhere near high enough to generate enough interest to pay for the operations of the cemetery. The second issue is that the state no longer requires local governments to have a perpetual care fund. Cities may use perpetual care dollars as they see fit to operate or improve the cemetery. The law changed in July of 2026. The city of Oelwein has \$301,882.12 in the perpetual care fund. Discussions of this fund were planned to take place during the FY2028 budget. The City Administrator planned to use these funds for capital projects at the cemetery. Using the funds for capital projects would ensure that no extra funding would be needed for operations after the funds were spent.

If the city had a perpetual care fund that funded the cemetery annually, they would need \$2,636,452 to generate the \$105,000 needed to operate the cemetery. The city would need to sell 4,394 plots to accumulate a proper cemetery perpetual care fund. Plus, the estimated fund amount is based on operations and does not take into consideration capital improvement for the cemetery.

The council will need to identify their goal so that city staff can work toward this goal. A goal of "a better cemetery" is not a goal and not something staff can work toward. Even identifying the goal as creating a well-manicured lawn at the cemetery is something that staff can work toward. This goal will require significant investment from the city and even more cuts from other general fund departments. It is important to understand that the issues at the cemetery are cyclical. Plus, everyone remembers the cemetery at a time where it was perfect. I believe it was perfect because mowers cost \$5.00 and we paid employees \$7.25. This is not the world we live in now, and accepting the restrictions we have now justifies the current state of the cemetery.

The issue with improving the cemetery comes back to allocation of resources. Regardless of the desire to make the cemetery the best-groomed park in the community, the desire must meet the budget. The condition of the cemetery may have declined as the city continued to eliminate positions, and that is a reasonable outcome. Even so, what is the current condition of the cemetery is subjective. Someone in the community that pays property taxes may not care at all about the cemetery, whereas someone who has a family member buried there would have a deep personal connection. Trying to balance both of those community members interest affects the priority of the cemetery in the general fund.



The council may direct the city administrator to allocate more resources to the cemetery and may even use the perpetual care fund to bolster the effort. Even with this investment, the future of the cemetery is already written with the state of Iowa restricting property taxes. The hope of having a cemetery that is free of issues and only receives compliments is unrealistic. It may be time for the city council to weigh the benefits of the cemetery to the costs of the cemetery.

Some things that would help reduce cost at the cemetery:

- Create a decorating policy allowing them from Memorial Day to Labor Day
- Create one water station eliminating the broken and obsolete current system
- Create strict rules on foundations and stone size
- Mow less of the cemetery that is not plotted (Attachment A)
- Eliminate some of the roads to lessen maintenance cost (Attachment B)

“The city workers need lighter weed eaters, maybe go electric”

The city purchases commercial weed eaters that need to operate for six to eight hours a day. Current electric weed eaters are designed for residential use and would not be applicable for the cemetery.

Stihl FS 91R gas powered string trimmer				
Cost	Weight	Run Time	Warranty	
\$379.99	12#	8 hours	2 years	
EZGO ST1611T battery powered string trimmer				
Cost	Weight	Run Time	Warranty	Extra Battery Per Unit
\$299.99 On Sale	12.4#	1-2 hours per battery	3 years	\$330.00

“We should move the parks crew to the cemetery on Fridays”

The parks crew is also down to three people as budget cuts have lowered the amount of people that can be hired each year. Plus, the downtown person is no longer employed requiring the parks department to spend time in the downtown weeding and taking care of the planters.

“Can we have a cemetery sexton”

Yes, the city would need to allocate more funding for the cemetery to create this position. Having another person or supervisor may not directly lead to a better cemetery.

“Can we do lawn treatments”

We can, the estimate cost is \$\$\$\$\$\$ because the cemetery is 48 acres.

“Can we mow less”

Yes, the city council must pass a resolution allowing this because staff will need confirmation to lessen the public outcry. Mowing less has always been a goal, but the city has a hard time getting away with this as the public is quick to comment on public land going back to nature. Current social constructs make people believe that manicured grass is the only path to happiness.



Conclusion

The City Administrator recommends no changes to operations at the cemetery that require making a better lawn. The effort and expense needed to bring some areas back to a plush lawn are not worth the investment. The city council should move forward on staff recommendations and see how this affects operations. The public outcry is not there on this issue, and the people who have no issues with the cemetery will not come forward. Remember, it takes 296 people to get to five percent of the population and 49 people to get to five percent of Oelwein's voting population.

Attachment A





Proposed Road Reduction





From a previous work session:

On July 20, the following was provided as concerns for the cemetery:

I have had a few residents that I'm friends with and family members asking why the cemetery looks rough. Why and how do we as a city use our resources better.

Using city guys to help to those flower beds downtown, when they could be utilizing hours at cemetery.

And why the grave stones are not cleaned from the mower,

I could keep going on.

Some of them have even talked to a couple of employees, so as a council person and other 3 I had gotten a call from 1, we would like to discuss how we resolve what is going on.

I know we have budgets, but we also have to make sure our guys are being utilized for city stuff,

The cemetery is usually a topic for the city every couple of years. We have some concerned residents talk about how there is too much grass on the graves, and it is not mowed well. This year is surprising as the city just cut a position from the cemetery. We also cut a position from parks. The city has not adjusted the amount of work at each department, only the number of employees. While the cemetery is a place for deep reflection, we should not forget the growing unsustainable burden this property places on the city and its residents. Once all the graves are sold and filled, the city will derive no income from this property. Unfortunately, this is not the good old days, with property taxes continuing to be a focal point of the state legislature, the ability for the city council to invest in the cemetery is limited. I discuss the cemetery annually with the Parks Superintendent and we have both decided we will do what we can with the limited resources available. As always, if the city council wants to change operations within a department, I look forward to the policy they set.

Additional history on the cemetery:

8/8/22

Payne received calls regarding Woodlawn Cemetery condition. The city is short staffed and is doing their best to keep up with mowing 53 acres and trimming headstones. Even though wages were increased to \$12.00 per hour, we are still not able to find employees. Seeders suggested "Silver Cord" high school volunteers might be able to assist.

5/8/2023

Councilmember Payne asked the council if they were interested in a work session on the cemetery maintenance. No council members responded.



Weed Spraying Woodlawn

Spring Application

Radar LV4000 – 2,4-D

\$40 a gallon

12 gallons needed / 2 pints per dose

\$480 per pass

2 Passes in the spring

\$960 for spring passes

Fall Applications

Trimec classic

\$60 a gallon

12 gallons needed / 2 pints per dose

\$720 per pass

2 Passes in the fall

\$1,440 for fall passes

Labor

Applicator – 5 days per pass

- Time spraying
- Refill with chemical/water
- Fueling

4 passes per year – **4 weeks of time**

Other points of consideration

- Current cemetery budget supply line - \$2,000
- \$2,400+ in chemical costs
- How many headstone flowers will we kill, stain plastic decorations
- Possibility of damage to headstones – many herbicides can contain salts or acids that can cause permanent damage to stones.
- Fuel and other equipment costs
- Going to need another person with applicator license
- Grass seed \$100 per bag

Starting Out:

Patience must be exercised for both these departments as it will take **many years** to bring these areas to the level that we envision. The city has many employees that we value and depend on to make our city the best it can be. As stated in previous budget meetings this department has had seven employees in the past and council is now expecting the same work to be completed with only three employees this year. For every one complaint that we get from a citizen that does not help or donate to the department, the employees get dozens of compliments from the public telling them how nice the facility looks and how they appreciate their hard work.

Background Information:

1. When I took over, the acting sexton told other cemetery employees not to help park superintendent in any way (as I found out at a later date)
 - Employees were told not to share a book that included water lines, gas and phone lines, any special information on how things were laid out, block by block.
2. Park superintendent created a burial application that funeral homes utilize as a fillable PDF and email to both the park assistant and superintendent, instead of calling.
3. Funeral homes are requested to text us that they are leaving church with procession now as an extra safeguard we created so we can let the cemetery crew know exactly when they will be arriving.
4. We updated foundation and lot purchasing forms with the fee schedule attached as fillable PDF's
5. An EF-1 tornado in 2020 and a straight-line wind event in the following year
6. Employees hear conversations from council, and it is very deflating to them as they work very hard and take pride in their work. Bottom-line, all city departments are doing more work with less employees.

Issues to address:

1. Foundations have settled making it impossible to trim evenly, hire contractors to come in and start raising/leveling foundations. The ground is very sandy at this location.
2. Footstones have been allowed in the past creating many alleys that only at 48" mower deck to get through, thus slowing mowing efforts.
3. Improvements to roads
4. Increased staff levels at facility
5. Council takes a hard line on decorations that take up employee's time – disposing of decorations, constantly resetting as trimming & trying to blow grass off headstones
6. Replace existing three buildings and have a single maintenance/office building
7. Continuing to increase wages
8. Another assistant position with focus on cemetery



Common questions

1. How many headstones are at Woodlawn? (estimate)
 - Estimated 8000 stones at Woodlawn – 48.86 acres
 - Estimated 400 stones at Oakdale – 3.38 acres
2. How many headstones are above ground vs. below the surface? (Estimated)
 - Estimated around 1000 flush mounted stones
3. What is the oldest section of the cemetery?
 - Block 15 would be one of the oldest parts of Woodlawn, SW corner
4. How many hours does it take to mow Woodlawn from start to finish?
 - This is an ongoing task that we cannot complete in a week
 1. Other interruptions/tasks:
 1. Customers buying lots
 2. Laying out a burial
 3. Digging a grave and backfilling
 4. Guys move to far end of cemetery during funeral or go mow Oakdale
 5. Employees waiting on procession to lead them to burial location
 6. Helping customers with purchasing foundations
 7. Rain/inclement weather/doctor visits
 8. Picking up loose decorations/ get in the way of trimming and blowing grass off headstones
 9. Helping patrons find headstones
 10. Watering sod from previous graves
 11. Equipment maintenance
 12. Fixing water lines
 2. Then there is Oakdale Cemetery, the west tower / west trail / city shops
5. How many headstones have been reported damaged from a City of Oelwein employee being the cause?
 - Only one when in 2018 in block 4, which we still don't think was city workers because of the proximity to the roadway.
6. Is there a lead position who oversees the mowing operations?
 - The park assistant oversees those day-to-day operations which includes the progress of both park and cemetery crews.
7. Does Joshua randomly inspect the areas where the crews mow and provide feedback to his crew?
 - Joshua does try to look things over when he can
8. Mower sizes
 - 3 – 60” decks, 2 -48” decks - due to limited spacing of headstones/footstones



Improvements Completed at Woodlawn

- Funding for employees has been reduced from 7 employees and now down to 3 since the early 90's, while responsibilities have not decreased

Responsibilities

- Woodlawn Cemetery – 48.8 acres Oakdale Cemetery – 3.3 acres
- West water tower, west trail, 4th street dump site, city shops
- Selling plots – talking with customers some time grieving customers to lay out plots to purchase, which involves research on maps, locating and digging up pins
- Selling, framing up and pouring foundations – 2x a year, grave location, Memorial Day prep, sweeping streets, sodding winter burials, winter burial preparations, snow removal, weekend burials for straight pay, empty lot - sidewalk snow removal, records updating.

Improvements

- New limestone Woodlawn sign – Park superintendent arranged as donation with no cost to city
- Mowers - including rear discharge mower to keep grass off headstones, working on another
- Garage doors – Replaced existing doors that would not close
- New truck – Much needed upgrade that we use for all burials
- New roof on buildings – storm damage when first took over
- New pin locators –locators that help find property pins
- New grave heater – Park superintendent arranged for school to build new one as old one fell apart
- Leaf blowers /trimmers /push mower – upgrading equipment
- Plate compactor – utilize before pouring foundations now
- Snow blowers – for clearing sidewalks on all the city owned lots
- Flammable cabinets – storing gas cans safely
- Air conditioning/office – keep the employees safe during hot weather
- Skid loader forks – complete projects with proper equipment
- Solar panels – part of city solar project
- Led warning lights all equipment
- Newer skid loader - Trade with streets, old loader only had slow gear and could not utilize attachments requiring employees borrowing streets skid.
- Chip seal roads – done in past and will continue in future

Updates/changes

- New website
 - maps and burial information for people to find areas on their own
- Cleaned up office
 - papers stapled to walls, no organization, looked bad for guests
- Paper Forms created for burials/foundations
 - Funeral homes now fill the Word form out with all the burial information and email
- Cleaned up shops
 - Got rid of supplies for equipment didn't own anymore
- New block signs
 - Worked with Jake Blitzsch in installing new block signs so guests can clearly navigate the cemetery
- Digging graves
 - **Cemetery employees dig graves** that frees up a street employee coming out to dig
 - They dig graves in about an hour which used to take employees 3-4 hours
- Signage
 - Took signs nailed to trees and put new updated signs on street posts



Other projects

- Worked through aftermath of the 2020 EF-1 tornado, during beginning of COVID
 - Estimated loss of 60-80 trees, 58 headstones knocked over
 - Ground up trees on site
 - Redgate – shelter removal, tree removal, playground equipment replacement, roof damage
 - Really glossing over the cleanup work from this event
- 2021 straight line winds
 - Estimated loss of 10 large trees
 - Power line dropped and lost utility pole
 - Branch dropped on roof that was repaired

Both events cleaned up without a single injury
- Trees spaded
 - Hired a contractor to spade out 39 trees on north end that had been left from an old tree farm
- Spoilage piles removed
 - A contractor utilized the mountain of spoilage on the south side
- Ground out abundance of stumps
 - Approximately 20 stumps that Chris went around and ground out when started
- Dead tree removal
 - Numerous trees that had to be removed that were dead standing
- Headstones repaired at Oakdale
 - Employees repaired around 30 headstones that had broken off and laying in grass
- Grave Burners
 - Replaced valves so equipment more reliable
- Bridge
 - Removed unsightly/unsafe homemade “bridge” in 18 in drainage area
- Ash tree removal
 - Removed approximately 20 ash trees due to the emerald ash borer, with another 14 ash that were brought down in block 20
- Mausoleum
 - Gathered information for council, worked with Pollarks to sell lots to have mausoleum placed in block 20
- New fencing Oakdale - 2022
 - Replace the front fence as part of the trail project that will look much better
- Cribbing - 2022
 - upgrade the cribbing so that digging graves will be a safer process
- 2nd sign over east entrance
 - Installed as a private donor paid for this project at no cost to the city
- Trail/bridge development
 - Developed the front area that is not plotted, with a bridge and trail
- Waterway
 - Straighten the drainage area to make more appealing and safer for the employees to maintain

Future projects

- GIS
 - Enter headstones and accompanying information on program to help with burial location and public access to finding burial locations
- Memorial brick fundraising project

Conditions when took over



Conditions when took over



Office area when started



Office area when now



Signs nailed to trees when started



New signage



Old Block Signs



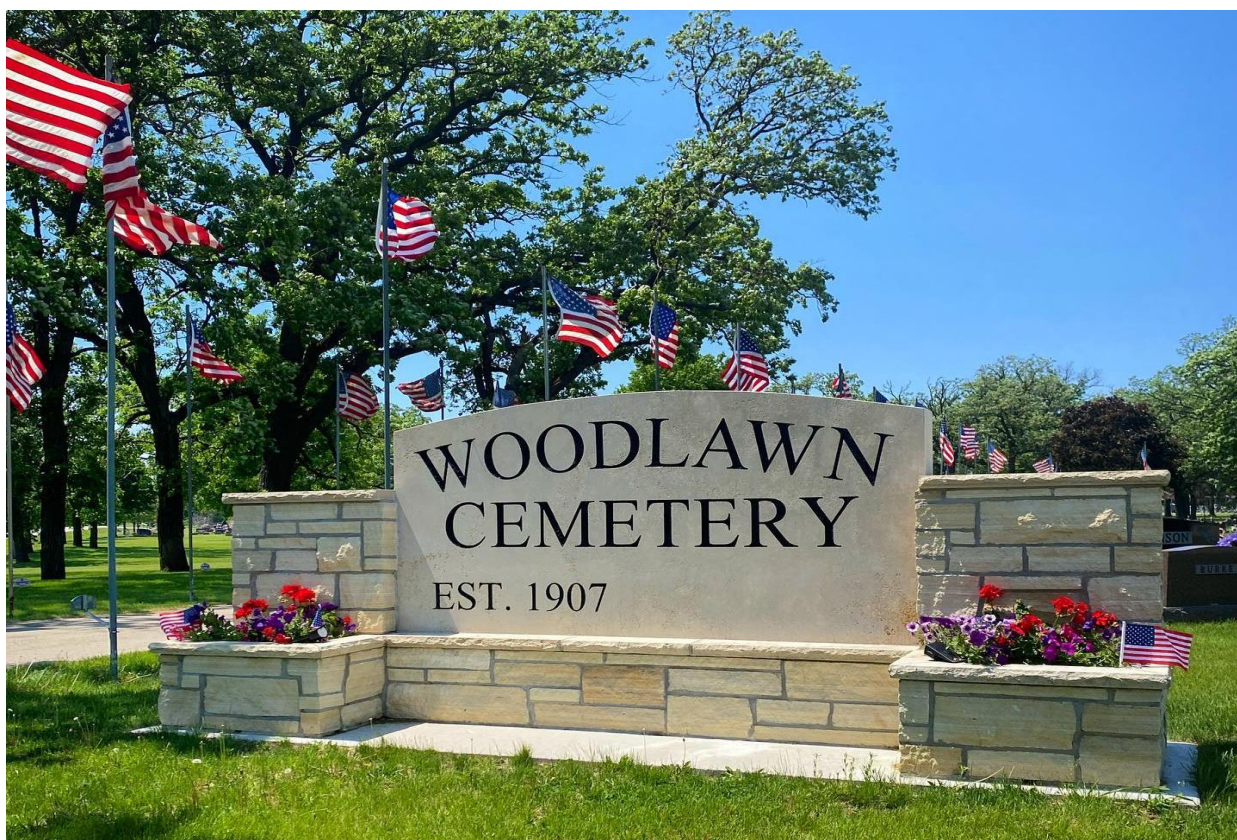
New Block Signs



Old cemetery sign



Park Superintendent arranged for new sign – no cost to city



New entrance sign on 13th Ave. on existing stone pillars



New grave heater built by school program

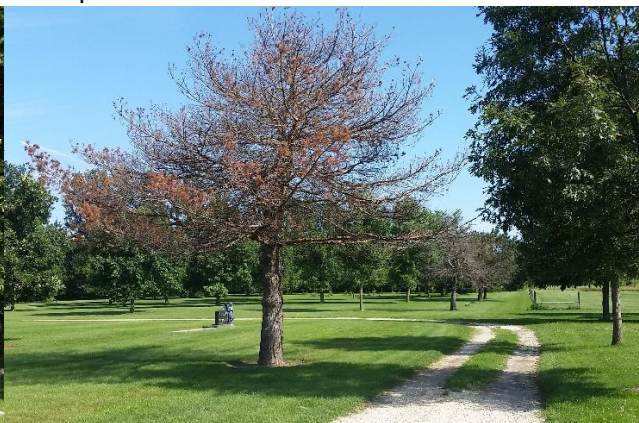




Grinding stumps - 21 stumps total when started throughout cemetery



Dead standing trees to clean up when started



Removal of 40 ash trees due to EAB



EF-1 Tornado March 28, 2020

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE

HOME FORECAST FAST WEATHER SAFETY INFORMATION EDUCATION NEWS SEARCH

News Headlines

- March 2020 Climate Summary
- Summary of March 20th Tornadoes in Northeast IA, Southeast MI
- March 20th Storm System This Storm, Not the Latest Storm, Landed and Remains
- Wanted: Board, Flash Flood Warnings & SEA Changes

The Tornadoes of March 28 2020
Weather.gov > La Crosse, WI > The Tornadoes of March 28 2020

Current Hazards Current Conditions Radar Forecasts Rivers and Lakes Climate and Past Weather Local Programs

Overview

A strong storm system moved through the central U.S. on March 28, 2020. This brought a strong warm front northward into northeast Iowa and far southwest Wisconsin. Thunderstorms formed during the afternoon hours north of the warm front and brought many reports of small hail covering the ground. In the late afternoon and early evening, storms formed near the warm front and produced brief tornadoes which caused damage in Oelwein, Iowa, near Maynard, Iowa, and north of Potosi, Wisconsin.

Tornadoes:

Tornado - Oelwein, IA

FAYETTE COUNTY

Date:	March 28, 2020
Time (Local):	5:30-5:35 pm
EF Rating:	EF-1
Est. Peak Winds:	100 mph
Path Length:	4 miles
Max Width:	120 yds
Signatures/Status:	0 / 0

Summary:

A rain-enshrouded tornado formed near the Fayette Co. line south of Oelwein and moved north-northeast into the west side of the city. The tornado caused damage to apartment buildings and homes. The tornado hit the north of the city of Oelwein.

Track Map




Tornado damage



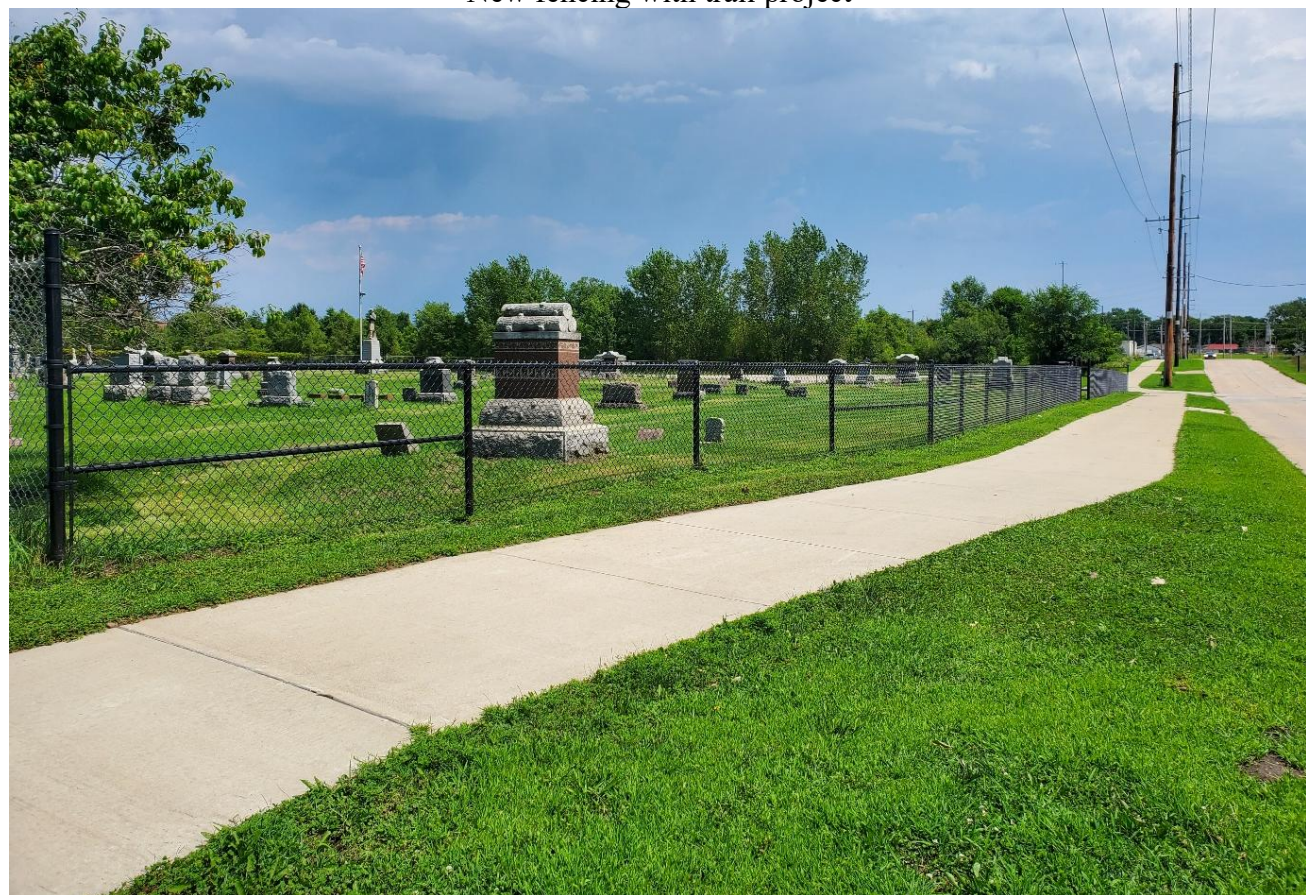
Monument setting



Front Oakdale Cemetery fencing held up with t-posts



New fencing with trail project

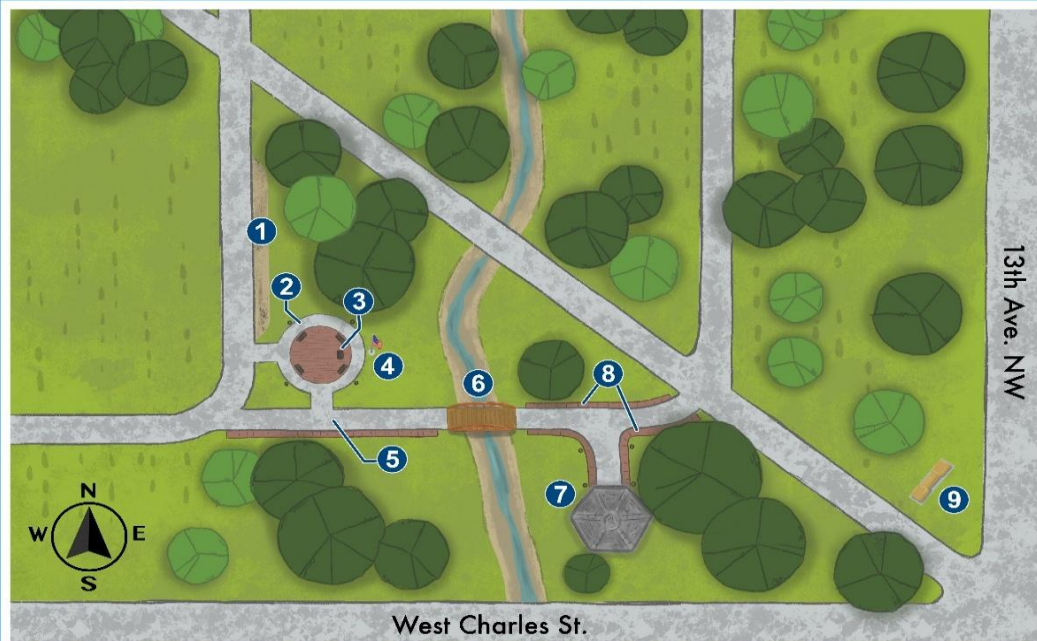




Proposed fundraising project

Woodlawn Memorial Project

Oelwein, Iowa



- 1 Handicap Parking
- 2 Patio
- 3 Podium
- 4 Flag Pole
- 5 New Trail
- 6 Memorial Bridge
- 7 Gazebo
- 8 Memorial Bricks
- 9 Woodlawn Sign

Old "bridge" in 18 when started



New bridge with trail project



www.oelweinparks.org



Multiple tree plantings



Budget discussion 2-9-2026



Budget Reductions



2026

- Two full time positions
- With this proposed budget, park staff has been reduced from six seasonal employees two years ago, to now three employees.
 - Started with four seasonals in 2016
 - One additional to maintain downtown
 - One additional to help with empty lots
- With the proposed budget, cemetery staff has been reduced from seven employees in the early 1990's to now three employees. In recent years we have had four employees now reduced to three. These employees also complete winter burials and snow removal.
 - Woodlawn cemetery 49 acres
 - Oakdale cemetery 4 acres
 - Literally thousands of headstones
 - No overtime – leave middle week if Saturday burial

FISCAL BUDGET 2027

6



Date: 8/25/25

To: Mayor, Council
City Administrator Dylan Mulfinger

From: Park Superintendent – Joshua Johnson

Subject: Woodlawn Cemetery Water Lines

In times of budget cuts, the city is looking at ways to save money and making decisions to limit future costs to the organization. In recent years we have noticed an increase in water leaks and repairs that have been needed to the water system at Woodlawn. Currently the cemetery has, to our best estimation over 1.7 miles of $\frac{3}{4}$ " black plastic water line buried with 1,300' feet of that distance, decaying 2" cast iron pipe. In addition, there are 60 hose bib spigots scattered throughout the cemetery for people to utilize watering flowers.

To save on future spending on maintenance and replacing the current system we are recommending replacing the system and simplifying the water lines. A filling station would be a push button facility so that there would be very limited water waste. With the current system there is the opportunity for someone to turn spigots on and leave run.

The new water line would be $\frac{3}{4}$ " pex that would be pulled through the existing 2" line from 13th Avenue, 420' to the west to the front of the office. At this location the water filling station will be installed. From this corner staff can trench a line to the south another 537' to the ditch along West Charles Street. From there, the line would be trenched another 268' and connect to the existing line that travels under the road and supplies Redgate park.

The new water system would only be 1,245' of new $\frac{3}{4}$ " PEX water line as opposed to 8,953'. The new system would only traverse under the road system twice as the current water system crosses under the roads a total of 26 times.

JOSHUA JOHNSON MA
OELWEIN PARK SUPERINTENDENT



Current water system

- 8,953' of black plastic $\frac{3}{4}$ " line, or 1.7 miles
- 60 hose spigots
- 26 road crossings



13TH AVE NW CO HWY W14

DISTANCES OF CURRENT WATER SYSTEM



PROPOSED NEW WATER LINES

