



Cemetery management goes high-tech

Township cemeteries provide an important connection to the past for township residents. And **Delta Charter Township** (Eaton Co.) has made recent efforts to strengthen that connection.

Last spring, the township—which operates two cemeteries, Delta Center and Delta Hillside—launched an online cemetery records search and Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping system, accessible from its website, www.deltami.gov. Through the portal, family members, local historians and genealogy enthusiasts can access all of the township's cemetery records—dating back to the 1800s—searchable by name, burial date, veteran status or cemetery name.

Genealogical information can even be submitted via the online portal, for inclusion in the official township records.

New technologies available

There is no shortage of advances in technologies to help communities operating municipal cemeteries. Most officials whose townships have cemeteries will agree they are being challenged to do more with less. Rising demand by their communities for burial and genealogical information are also increasing pressure to provide easy, self-service access to

burial records and cemetery maps by offering an online burial search from their website.

In addition to online record searches, remote access and cloud hosting can make accessing data from the cemetery grounds or a home office much easier. Larger cemeteries often choose GIS mapping, which makes location data available to cemetery-specific mobile apps. Another online tool allows townships to tag and showcase available cemetery plots. The public can search, access additional information, and submit purchase inquiries directly to the township.

'Improving our ability to serve'

In Delta Charter Township, the elected officials, cemetery sexton and information technology (IT) staff each know the important role cemeteries can play in residents' lives, often during a very difficult time, and wanted to ensure excellence in service for this critical function. Officials there knew that a system that was easily accessible was a must when the township first began considering an online records system.

“We needed a cemetery software program that could be accessed in the clerk’s office and in the cemeteries by our cemetery sexton,” noted clerk **Mary Clark**. “Having the ability to look at all the data on one screen was also very appealing from a customer service perspective. In addition, being able to look at live data to know what plots are available for purchase greatly improves our ability to serve a family—and is especially critical when working with a newly grieving family.”

With the rise in popularity of people turning to online resources to trace their ancestry, online cemetery records are becoming more and more vital, not only for residents locally, but for people across the nation and even around the world.

“Genealogy is so important—it is our family history,” Clark said. “Our township’s online search allows anyone to search the data to find out the location of their deceased family members. We hope to eventually have actual pictures of family grave markers online.”

Delta Charter Township is phasing in GIS mapping for its cemeteries, allowing residents to pinpoint most burial plot locations. Said Clark, “The online search and mapping portals are formatted for display on all sized screens, so those visiting our cemeteries can search the database on their smartphones, map the results and navigate directly to the specific plot.”

What to consider

With the variety of technological advances for township cemeteries, township officials must carefully weigh their options when considering expanding their offerings. One important consideration is that such new cemetery tools each require some sort of data management system or database—and someone within the township to be in charge of the ongoing maintenance and oversight of the database.

Selecting the appropriate software can a major decision for many townships. Here are some additional tips to consider when selecting cemetery software:

Realistic budgeting—Be realistic about what the software will cost and how much the township can afford. Keep in mind, just like when you purchase a new vehicle, maintenance is required. Technology changes rapidly, and software as well as computer equipment have ongoing costs to stay up to date.

You get what you pay for—Consider software that meets your township’s top needs, maximizes its resources, and offers the best price. In other words, evaluate your options based on “return on investment” (ROI). Consider features the township might want someday and plan for those costs as well. Then, look at the project as a whole to determine the true cost to factor into your ROI calculations.

It’s not all about bells and whistles—The best features in the world are worth nothing if the system is not user-friendly for both the administrators within the township, and for the residents and other users as well, or if the software’s customer service is lacking. Talk with colleagues in other townships that offer certain technology or enhancements, and learn from their experiences.

Involve users in the process—While involving any township IT staff or consultants is critical, equally as important

is engaging those who will use and rely on the software on a regular, or even daily, basis, to accomplish critical management tasks.

Be committed—Any new software is only as good as the township’s commitment to training and implementing the technology for the good of the community, and the residents you serve. There may be a learning curve, but with the proper resources and assistance, such upgrades will benefit the township, its officials and employees, and residents.

Look to the future—New technologies can be added upon as your township, its needs and its budget evolve. Perhaps your township board would be most comfortable starting with the basics, then adding more features, which could include integrated standard or GIS mapping, public-facing online burial search, cash receipting and contract management, as well as tools to automate property sales and promotion.

A source of comfort, and pride

Township cemeteries have long been a source of comfort, and pride, for many communities. The advances of software and technologies can help to increase the value and importance of these places for generations to come.



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