

Roundtable joins fight to keep New Evergreen alive

By T. KEVIN WALKER
For THE CHRONICLE

Amid the hundreds of bestsellers at Special Occasions Bookstore, it is easy for customers to overlook the brown clipboard in front of the cash register.

But the store's owners, Ed and Miriam McCarter, find time to remind shoppers of it as they ring up purchases.

"Have you heard about this petition they are starting to try to get them to expand Evergreen," Miriam McCarter asked one of her regular customers.

The "they" are members of the Black Leadership Roundtable, a group of men and women who meet to address issues important to the African American community.

The "them" are members of a group with a similar purpose, the Winston-Salem Board of Aldermen.

The fate of the city-owned New Evergreen cemetery, located off of New Walkertown Road, was decided on May 18, when a proposal went before the board to expand the facility and failed to win a majority vote. Board members tied 4-4, and the vacationing mayor was not present to cast the deciding vote.

The decision means that in the year 2001, New Evergreen, the first major cemetery to open its doors to blacks in 1944, will sell its last plots and reach maximum capacity.

If aldermen are to take another vote on the issue, at least five members must agree to it, one more than expansion supporters originally got.

The roundtable is hoping the signatures of hundreds of citizen will show board members that the future of New Evergreen is a great concern.

"Almost everyone whose attention I've called to it have been anxious to sign it," Miriam McCarter said referring to the petition.

"(Aldermen) say they are not closing the cemetery, but in essence that's what they are doing," Ed McCarter added. "It's not like we are going to stop dying all of a sudden."

The concern expressed by the McCarters is exactly the kind of grassroots outcry that roundtable



Kevin Jones adds his name to a growing list of people concerned about the fate of New Evergreen Cemetery. Jones said the petition drive to save the cemetery is important.

leader and N.C. Rep. Larry Womble, D-Forsyth, wants from citizens.

"We want citizens to sign the petitions to prove to the mayor and the board of aldermen that the cemetery is needed," Womble said. "The decision will place a great financial hardship on the African American community."

Besides the physical beauty of the sprawling cemetery and its historical significance, Womble says New Evergreen's rates are also attractive to average working people.

Plots at New Evergreen cost about \$400, several hundred less than a plot would cost at a private facility.

Ironically, the main reason aldermen voted against the expansion, board members said, was the financial hardship New Evergreen's yearly deficit places on the city, a point Womble disputes.

"The figures show that expansion would make money for the city," he said. "I don't believe it's a financial situation, I believe for some reason that hasn't been explained, they just want to get out of the cemetery business."

Projections show that with an expansion and a slight increase in prices, the cemetery can actually make a profit after years of operating in the red. Without the expansion, figures show a loss of over \$1

million between the years 2000 and 2007.

The figures were presented to aldermen before the first vote by the city's property maintenance staff, who are responsible for the upkeep of New Evergreen and Woodland, the other city-owned cemetery.

"In fiscal year 2000-2001, the cemetery will run out of graves and our deficit will grow significantly," said property maintenance superintendent Randy Rogers.

Rogers said his staff drew up the proposal, to buy an additional 13 acres for New Evergreen, only after a legitimate effort to find private buyers failed.

Currently, 13 acres adjacent to New Evergreen are being offered to the city at a discount - Williams Development Company has agreed to sell the land to the city for \$175,000, which is \$23,000 less than the property's estimated value.

So why would the aldermen throw away such lucrative prospects?

Because, says Alderman Vernon Robinson, cemeteries are a business for private individuals, not city governments.

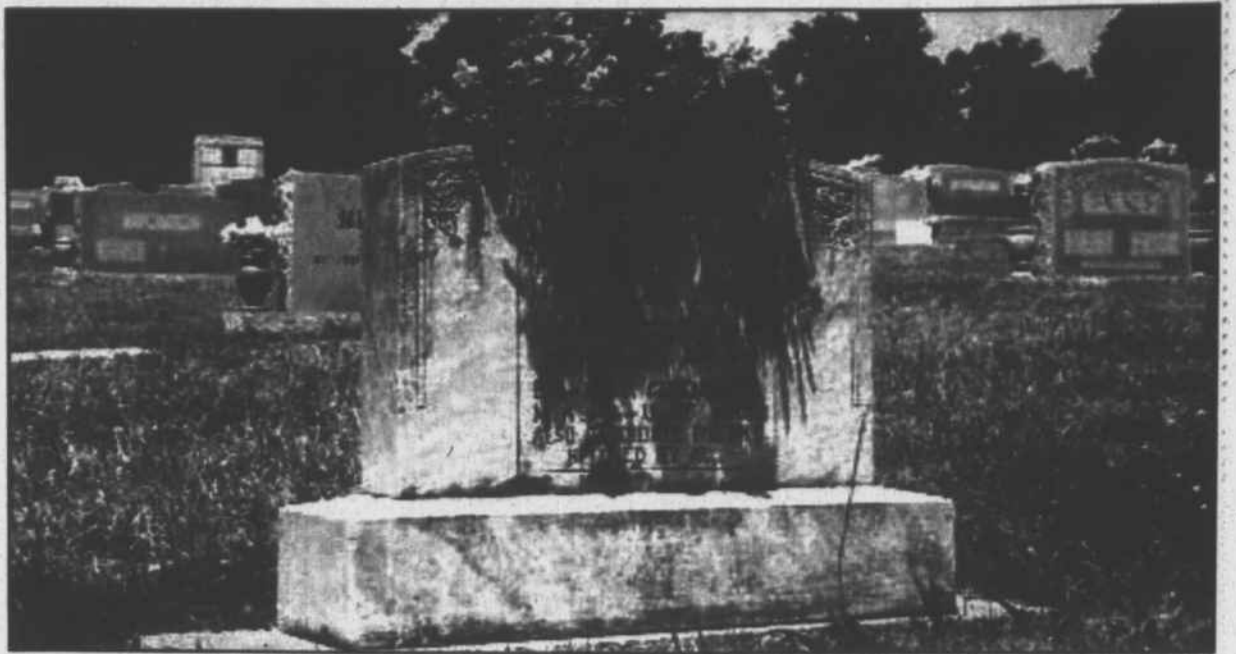
"I think this is a totally misplaced effort," Robinson said of the petition. "We should not add insult to injury by expanding a business we shouldn't have been in, in the first place. I have no intention of changing the unchangeable."

Robinson says if low income people want someone to blame for taking away their opportunity to buy cheap plots, they should direct their anger at the middle class, who he says are "ripping off" the poor.

"It isn't poor folks buying plots over there, it's middle-class blacks who can afford private cemeteries - including a member of the board of aldermen who has purchased plots," Robinson said. "Last time I checked, I don't know of any poor folks on the board of aldermen."

Robinson was the only African American board member who rejected the expansion proposal. The first term Republican says that he and members of the roundtable do not see eye-to-eye on the issues most important to the black community.

"Where is the compassion for lit-



The problem at New Evergreen Cemetery is that middle-class blacks have bought plots, says Alderman Vernon Robinson. "It isn't poor folks buying plots over there it's middle class blacks who can afford private cemeteries, including a member of the Board of Aldermen who has purchased plots."

tle black children that are being pushed out of charter schools because they don't have enough white playmates," Robinson asked, referring to the trouble some all-black schools are facing because they don't meet state integration policies. "Womble hasn't done a damn thing about that."

"African Americans have little political resources, they should not be wasted on a moot issue."

But Alderman Nelson Malloy isn't ready to give up the fight. Malloy says his fellow board members do not know the emotional attachment that many blacks have toward the cemetery.

"New Evergreen is just as dear to the African American community, as God's Acre is to people in Old Salem," he said.

Malloy, who has several family members buried at the cemetery, says many of his colleagues rejected the expansion because they thought they were doing taxpayers a favor.

"It got caught up in a political issue. Some of the new board members, I think were overzealous. They were in a cut, cut, cut frame of mind, it was not given due consideration,"

Malloy said.

If projections for an expanded, and slightly more expensive, New Evergreen are good and \$200 from every plot sold goes into a nearly \$3 million fund for long-term upkeep of the cemetery, Malloy says taxes would not have been affected.

"I really saw no cause of why we shouldn't have voted initially to expand the cemetery," he said. "If I was in such a position to vote on maintaining God's Acre, I would do whatever is necessary in order to maintain it. I hope they will vote to maintain the integrity of New Evergreen; I hope they would reconsider."

Board member Vivian Burke says regardless of whether the board agrees to another vote, the serene beauty of the cemetery will be maintained by the city.

"Some people had been misled, some thought the city would have nothing more to do with the cemetery," Burke said. "I took time to tell them the truth behind it."

The truth, Burke says, is with or without an expansion, laws require that the cemetery be cared for as long as the city owns it.

"I own my plot at Evergreen, and I feel comfortable that it will be taken care of," she said.

Although Burke voted for the expansion last month, she admits that one of the reasons she did so was because she thought a "no" vote would be "misunderstood." The veteran board member will not say how she will vote once the petition is presented to the aldermen, but she says New Evergreen is no longer the only option for the city's black community.

"Minorities are buying (plots) in private cemeteries now; it's not like it used to be," Burke said.

While battle lines are being drawn, names are quickly filling the petitions at Special Occasions, Forsyth Seafood, American Legion posts, The Chronicle and many other locations around the city.

Womble and the Black Leadership Roundtable plan to present the petition to the board in August.

"These aldermen for the most part, are good aldermen," Womble said. "They are supposed to represent the people, we are asking them to listen to the cries and desires of the people."

Children Like These Are the Key To Our Future

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. proved that mass action could profoundly and positively affect America's attitudes toward racial prejudice and discrimination.

IF WE TAKE MASS ACTION
as a community
and cherish the future of
all our children
and prepare each one
for success in life,
we will grow adults who
... reach their full potential,
... make more contributions to society,
... and who take a productive role
in the workplace.

Failing to do so,
will certainly diminish the power
of Forsyth County's future.

Our grateful appreciation to the parents and caregivers of the children pictured here for making their smiles possible!

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