

# Cemetery Turf Management

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Danville, Va., has over a century of experience


Curtis Murphy serves as cemetery superintendent with the Danville Public Works Department in Danville, Va.

The city of Danville, Va., has managed cemeteries for more than 170 years.

Its first, Grove Street Cemetery, was established in 1833 and consisted of only 2 acres, a small area for its first groundskeeper to maintain.

Today, the Danville Public Works Department maintains eight cemeteries that total 186 acres. In his 30-year career with the city of Danville, Curtis Murphy has served as a cemetery supervisor and superintendent. The largest cemetery under his leadership is 70 acres in Highland Burial Park, just north of the city, which was established in 1924. About 23,000 are buried there.

Murphy operates under a \$675,502 budget that covers maintenance of turf and landscaping, salaries of 11 full-time and two part-time employees (about to go full-time), fuel for equipment and vehicles and hospitalization for full-time employees. Out of those 13 employees, four work funerals mostly, says Lee Rigsby, a Danville cemetery supervisor for 16 years who typically manages the cemeteries on the north side of town. Besides scheduling around funerals, Rigsby's most difficult part about his supervisory job deals with broken-down equipment, such as a mower or weed-eater.

"If you've got one mower and got one man tied to mowing, or if you've got a weed-eater down, you've got a man who's not doing anything that is productive," Rigsby says.

#### Working around services

Funerals are a priority for the cemetery ground crews, Murphy says, and the department averages two funerals a day. He and his staff take them seriously.

Ted Morris has been a cemetery supervisor for 18 years and manages cemeteries on the south side of Danville, Va.

"We made a promise when we took this job that we were going to do our best to help people because when somebody loses a family member—whether wife or husband, mother or father, sister or brother—you're not yourself," says Ted Morris, a Danville cemetery supervisor for 18 years who typically manages cemeteries on the south side of town. "You're kind of sad and taken back a little bit. Lee's job and my job when we're dealing with these folks is to help them, kind of lift them up a little bit and make sure everything goes well as far as getting the grave repaired, making sure everything is done, making sure when they are driving up that everything looks good, because that's the least we can do.

"You kind of feel their pain a little bit," Morris continues. "You cannot help but be affected by the way they feel, but you cannot let it get to you. If you do, you cannot do your job. What is a funeral for? It's for the people that are living. It's not for you. It's not for me. It's to say goodbye, to a certain extent, as far as this life is concerned."

Oftentimes, funerals come in spurts. "One of our problems is that it's feast or famine in cemeteries," Morris says. "Like everything else, we either have more funerals than we know what to do with, and it keeps you hopping."

Murphy says the public works department must constantly react to act. For example, when ground crews are not working funerals they are repairing the cemetery turf damaged by weather, foot traffic or vehicles.

Newer graves can pose a problem for the city's ground crews. Robert Slayton, a city of Danville public service operator, says wet conditions will cause newer gravesites to sink. Often, the dirt has sunken to the point that it is only about 18 inches above a vault, he says.



Established in 1924 and the largest of the Danville cemeteries, Highland Burial Park covers 70 acres and has about 23,000 people buried there.
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Ground crews then step into a repair-and-replace mode. While at one of the gravesites in Highland Burial Park, Groundskeeper Danny Watlington says he and members of his ground crews remove the existing top turf in blocks and place it to the side. Next, they shovel dirt atop the grave that has sunken from wet weather and pack the dirt using a metal hand tamper. Once the dirt is packed down solid, they sow grass seed on the plot, pack it down and replace the removed blocks of turf. Lastly, they sow additional seed over the existing turf.

Danville Cemeteries		
Cemetery	Acres	Date established
Freemans	9	1864
Green Hill	22	1863
Grove Street	2	1833
Highland Burial Park	70	1924
Leemont	16	1878
Mountain View	18	1920
Oak Hill	30.3	1901
Schoolfield	8.56	1922

The summer drought of 2007 caused newer-sown grass, which was once tall and established turf last year, to die. Older grass survived better, Murphy says. This severely dry weather prompted the public works department to produce its own topsoil. The dryness prevented the growth of natural turf. Watering wasn't an option on the large acreage of cemetery plots. The department has been stockpiling mulch and adding fertilizer, lime and dirt, so the mix will eventually breakdown for making topsoil that is being used for shoveling on graves.

On fresh graves that have sunk or have lost turf due to the drought, Rigsby says the ground crews are sowing a contractor's mix of rye, Kentucky fescue and grass seed for shade and sun.

The repairing of sunken graves continues in the fall until the ground freezes, Rigsby says. Ground crews will pick up the practice again in March and will stop in May when the summer temperatures become hotter. The contractor's mix sprouts within days if the weather is conducive.

"Not only does it help us put down the grass seed, but it also lets the families know that we know that your mom's or dad's grave doesn't have any turf on it. When we dress it up with that mulch, it let's them know that we are concerned and trying to take care of it. When we make the effort of trying to dress it up, it's really cut down on the complaints," Rigsby says.

Mowing, weed-eating, etc.

Mowing and weed-eating takes some time. Slayton says about eight people will mow Highland Burial Park for four days and will weed-eat for about seven days. Four or five people dig graves for funerals.

Murphy says workers usually follow a two-week mowing schedule and a four-week weed-eating schedule, providing the weather cooperates. The employees take pride in their work.

 Roger Gilreath, caretaker at Leemont Cemetery in Danville, Va., mows carefully around grave markers.

"When my guys are cutting the grass and things like that, I told them a long time ago, when they are dealing with the cemetery and working, to pretend the grave they are fixing is their mother's, father's, sister's or brother's," Morris says. "If they treat every grave like it was their own, you'd be surprised at what you can get done."

When funerals take place, Morris advises his crew to use common sense when it comes to landscaping. "We don't go anywhere where it can be disturbing to the funeral," he says. "You don't have equipment running or anything else where it's affecting the people at the funeral or that they can hear."

 With its hilly terrain, Leemont Cemetery in Danville, Va., challenges ground crews when they mow and perform landscaping work.

Murphy says the oldest cemeteries pose the most problems when doing maintenance, mainly because of the layout and hilly terrain.

 Groundskeeper Danny Watlington, foreground, packs the gravesite dirt with a metal hand tamper. Public Service Operator Robert Slayton dips his shovel into the topsoil contractor's mix developed by the Danville Public Works Department.

A cemetery such as Green Hill dates back to 1863 when narrow, graveled driveways and rolling hills were the norm, Morris says. That makes it difficult to move vehicles and heavy equipment in and out to make repairs or dig graves. Sometimes, they must be dug by shovel.

The ground crews perform other maintenance work, too, such as cleanup after storms.

About three years ago, they picked up debris, trees and tree limbs after a small tornado swirled through town. This was another example of them reacting to act, rather than following a set plan.

Another problem when doing landscaping work is the influx of flower arrangements left by family members months after a burial has occurred or long after Mother's Day or Father's Day has passed. When family members fail to remove or replace the flowers in a vase, the flowers can blow on the grounds. Workers must then pick them up before they can mow or weed-eat.

"In the grass-cutting season, we have to limit the amount of flowers that are put down on the ground around the stone, because if you do not, when you've got 70 acres to cut, it's a little more difficult," Morris says. "Most of the time you are limited to one or two arrangements per grave."

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