

## Recent “noise” surrounding the Santa Maria Cemetery

The CDC reported that over 3.35 million people died in 2020. That is nearly a 170% increase from the total number of deaths in 2017. With the increase of deaths, there has also been a correlated increase in the amount of people visiting cemeteries nationwide. Visiting a cemetery is a great part of the healing process and something that is highly encouraged. How often you visit a grave is up to you, and while grief is very personal and can make you feel lonely, you can temper your grief through visiting a grave of a loved one. Although most religions teach that this isn't where your loved one's soul resides, it is still nice to make a connection to the one you've lost. For many people, visiting a grave of a loved one is a cause for comfort, peace, and healing. For others, the gravesite of a loved one – or a much-admired public figure – can become a gathering place for the living to show their fondness for the departed and keep their memory alive. Often, families will visit the grave of a loved one when they are able to get together, especially if they all live far away from one another. While it is encouraged to visit the cemetery, you are also highly encouraged to be mindful of other mourners who are also visiting their loved ones, to be mindful of the surrounding community, and to be respectful of the cemetery's rules and regulations.

Regrettably, over the past year, with the increase of the number of people visiting the cemetery, there also has been an increase in disregard of the surrounding community, as well as the cemetery's rules and regulations. In addition, there also has been a noticeable lack of respect of others who may be visiting the cemetery or for others' graves. Unfortunately, Santa Maria Cemetery is not alone; many of the cemeteries within the entire state of California has seen an uptick in this behavior, and cemetery offices consistently receive complaints from the public regarding this insensitive conduct. Some examples here in Santa Maria include smoking and/or drinking of alcohol on cemetery grounds, conducting unauthorized barbeques on the grounds, setting up tables over other loved one's graves, placing tents or awnings over other's graves, and even bringing unauthorized porta-potties onto the cemetery grounds. In fact, just recently, the maintenance staff discovered unexpended bullets around a grave and it has been noted that other cemeteries within California have had instances where rival gangs have had confrontations on cemetery grounds.



In addition to the objectionable activity surrounding the cemetery, there has been a definite increase in the number of unauthorized flowers/decorations on the cemetery grounds. Often, the staff must take more time to clean up and remove excessive and unauthorized decorations due to potential safety issues to visitors, the equipment, and to themselves. While any maintenance staff's priority is performing services to prepare for the interment of deceased loved ones for grieving families, with this need to interrupt their normal upkeep activities, it obviously affects all other aspects to the performance of their duties. Specifically in the case of the bullets, if a mower had hit these, there would be the possibility of causing harm to anyone or anything in the surrounding area and may have even been fatal. This also applies to small rocks, marbles, or other potential projectiles. The cemetery is trying to be accommodating to the public and as such they have adopted a policy that all flowers/decorations must be inside the approved cemetery galvanized vase. Concerning the upkeep of the grave, it can only be the cemetery staff that makes any kind of ground change or improvement for legal purposes. The key point to keep in mind, that seems to have some misconception, is the cemetery owns the entire cemetery grounds, and the owner of the grave has only purchased the burial rights; meaning they have only purchased the right to bury a loved one in that particular spot of the cemetery.



For education purposes, the cemetery here in Santa Maria is part of the Santa Maria Cemetery District (“SMCD” or “District”) and is an Independent Special District Public Cemetery. The District is governed by a Board of Trustees (“Board”) that has statutory authority to exercise all rights and powers to own, operate, improve, and maintain the cemetery. The California Health and Safety Code along with other California statutes has provided legislation which empowers the Board to adopt rules and regulations as they pertain to cemetery operations and decorum. The Board, having jurisdiction and control of the cemetery, may make and enforce general rules and regulations, and appoint managers or other officers to enforce obedience to the rules and regulations with such powers and duties regarding the cemetery as may be necessary. (California Health and Safety Code §8133.) These Rules and Regulations shall be reviewed annually by the Board; however, the Board can make amendments to these Rules and Regulations with proper notice at public meetings.

As the governing authority, and in response to the recent increase in objectionable behavior, the cemetery Board has recently decided to return to firmly enforcing the current rules and regulations. Yet, an adverse part of returning to these current rules and regulations is that these were last approved in 2010. So, with the overall change in societal norms, the newly hired

district manager is in the process of revamping these outdated conditions. For example, rather than not allowing solar lights on the cemetery grounds at all, the district manager has advised the Board to authorize them. However, as with all decorations, they must fit securely inside the cemetery approved galvanized vase. Another area that recently changed is the locking of the Newlove entrance gate around 4:15pm daily with the possibility of complete lockup during the weekend. This was done for various reasons, but visitors will be rest assured that they still have continued access to the Southlawn part of the cemetery through the main set of gates off College Road. Furthermore, in response to inquiries from the public, the cemetery has initiated potential negotiations with security companies to provide reassurance to the public that they may visit the cemetery with their overall safety and security in mind when the cemetery staff is not present.

As for the overall directions concerning flowers and decorations, the cemetery has decided to maintain mostly traditional norms simply due to safety and security concerns and how it pertains to the general maintenance. There are a variety of things considered “traditional” to leave at gravesites, and many of these things even are encouraged by any cemetery manager to keep the cemetery from feeling too bleak. Sometimes, people want to leave an item at the gravesite as a remembrance, whether it’s flowers, a stuffed animal, or, in the case of some others, it may be empty liquor or beer bottles. While it may seem like a great idea to leave a little memento on someone’s grave as a memorial, there are some Do’s and Don’ts about the practice. For example, anything that could jeopardize the safety and security of visitors, the maintenance staff, or even to the equipment is discouraged, is considered a violation, and will be discarded once identified. Before you think that you want to leave something, you should always check with any individual cemetery’s rules and regulations before planning to leave anything at a gravesite. When you do bring something, be sure that whatever you do bring won’t blow away easily or otherwise impede the ability of the maintenance staff to maintain the grounds. If you do decide to not abide by the rules and regulations of the cemetery, there should be no surprise if your decoration is discarded by the maintenance staff with no compensation for the removal, and if the disregard for the flowers and decorations continue, the Board may be forced into other options for compliance.



Conversely, as our cemetery here in Santa Maria completes its planned expansion over the next couple of years, the community will definitely be able to identify changes to the cemetery. The Board, in conjunction with the district manager, will be consistently addressing new areas of operations, and possibilities, in hopes of bringing the cemetery into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in lockstep with the current societal environment. It is the hope that these changes will be appreciated as the cemetery staff and Board of Trustees try to beautify the cemetery as well as

bring more technology into being. One current example is if anyone is looking to identify the location of a loved one's grave, they simply can go to the cemetery website, [santamariacemetery.com](http://santamariacemetery.com), and on the Home Page there is a link to "Search for a Loved One." Also, this webpage will eventually be able to be accessed by scanning a QR Code, via your smartphone, that will be on signs on the cemetery grounds. Furthermore, this QR Code may be accompanied by another QR Code where the public will be able to access the full set of currently approved rules and regulations. Likewise, there are plans to integrate LED signs at the entrances of the cemetery that will provide daily updated information to the public such as services scheduled, dates of any planned complete purge of the cemetery, as well as any pertinent information dealing with upcoming special events valuable to the public (for instance, Memorial Day activities). As well, the cemetery is researching the possibility of incorporating solar projects to assist with the maintenance of the grounds and to possibly utilize EV's into the maintenance inventory, so the cemetery will lower its carbon footprint. Finally, the cemetery is exploring the possibility of bringing in alternatives to traditional burials and cremations that have been the norm for several decades. Examples of this would include the possibility of cremation boulders, scatter gardens, as well as a possible ossuary.

So as the cemetery makes changes that will be to the overall benefit of the public and to the Santa Maria community, the cemetery is asking for patience and understanding. They are also respectfully asking that everyone's behavior be guided accordingly to ensure everyone garners the respect their loved one and others should receive while visiting the cemetery and the cemetery grounds. If you have questions, inquiries, suggestions, or concerns surrounding the cemetery and its operations, the public is encouraged to make an appointment to speak with the district manager about what is happening at the cemetery. Unfortunately, what normally occurs is that some rumor or inuendo gets started on social media, or even on the cemetery grounds, and then it picks up steam as people add new and possible inaccurate information to the story. So, if you want to ensure that you have the most current information, as the cemetery makes changes or returns to following the current rules and regulations, you are encouraged to check out the cemetery website, [santamariacemetery.com](http://santamariacemetery.com), or even follow the advice of an "old saying".... "go straight to the horse's mouth," and speak to the district manager.