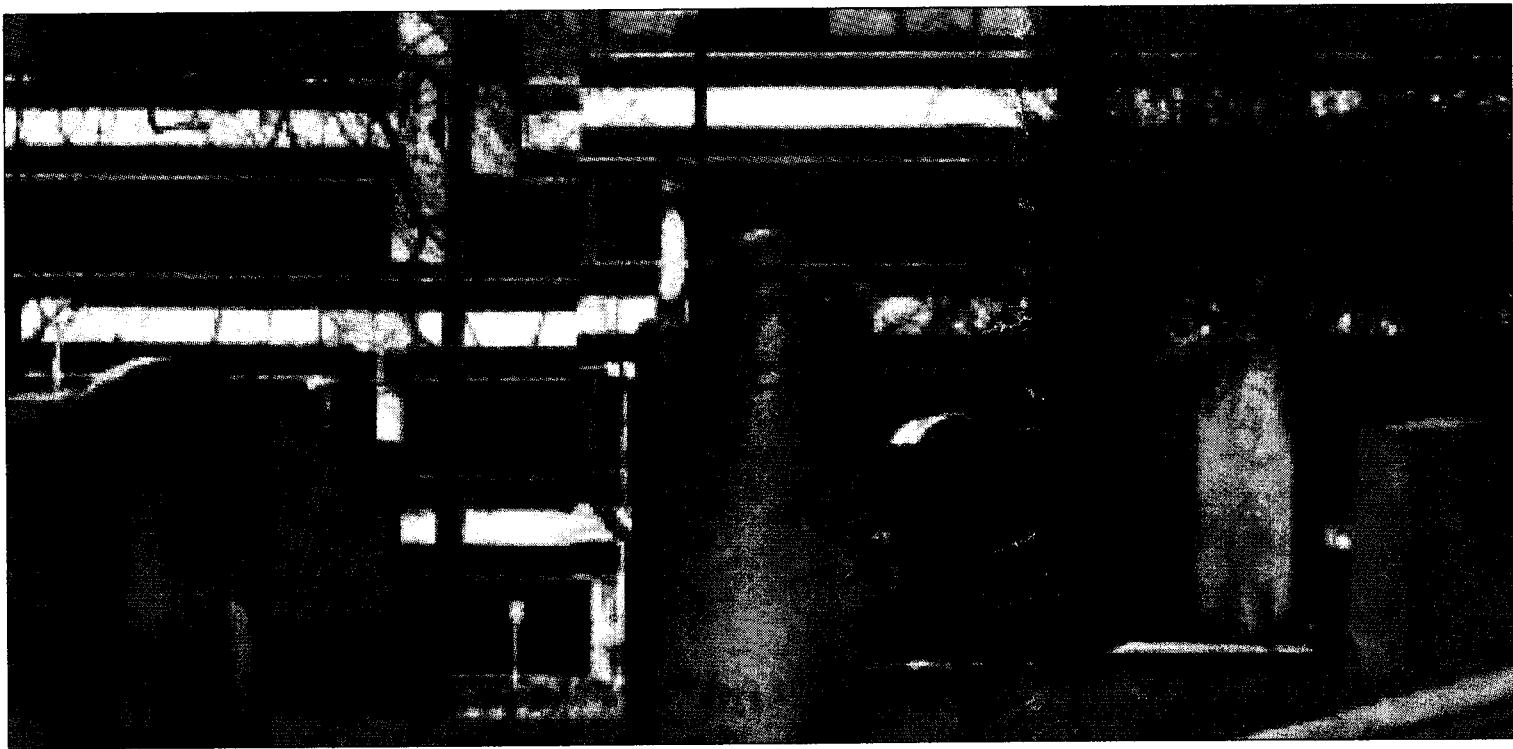


BATTLE FOR THE CEMETERY



Nick Muscavage/ Albany Student Press

Beth Abraham-Jacob cemetery on Fuller Road with SUNY Polytechnic Institute behind.

By NICK MUSCAVAGE

A silent battle is unfolding over Fuller Road and its outcome affects a population well into the hundreds that has long been silent, too.

More than 1,200 people are buried in the cemeteries along either side of the road, and the land surrounding them has become a commodity over the past few years for SUNY Polytechnic Institute, University at Albany and some developers.

Recently, an entity named Mercer Properties LLC has purchased 15 parcels of land, according to Albany County tax maps — totaling \$4 million as reported by the Albany Times Union and Albany Business Review — all located on or around Fuller Road effectively surrounding the cemeteries.

The outcome could decide who will be the future neighbors of the cemeteries and would potentially affect funerals that are conducted at the still functioning burial sites.

"It is really encroaching on us," said Stewart Sacklo, president of Independent Benevolent Society, which is the cemetery across the road from SUNY Poly and on the same side as UAlbany. It currently has 874 graves.

"I hate to say it, but the State University is not such a good neighbor to have," he added.

Sacklo has held his position for 10 years, and has been a vocal member of the development discussions the whole time, although not always effectively.

When Mercer Properties acquired the parcels of land in 2015 surrounding the cemetery, Sacklo went to a SUNY Poly meeting and asked if the institution knew the purpose of the sudden purchases but did not rec

eive a direct answer. So he went to UAlbany and spoke with President Robert J. Jones who told him to refer to SUNY Poly — in Utica.

Sacklo said he has been to nearly two dozen meetings pertaining to zoning, development and construction, all with similar results. "We're really getting taken on this whole thing," he said. "There's nobody listening."

For other parties involved, it is still too early to come to conclusions.

"So far for me, there's no controversy or anything else," said Mark Israel, head of the cemetery committee for Beth Abraham-Jacob Congregation, the cemetery located on the same side of Fuller Road as SUNY Poly.

He went on, "Is there a possibility? Yeah, who knows? But there's nothing active that we have going on with anybody right now."

Israel is hoping that the interests of the cemeteries are taken into account, although the intent of Mercer Properties is still unclear.

Mercer Properties is an extension of the Albany-based business Columbia Development Corporation, which developed Patroon Creek Corporate Center and Albany County Family Court, among other properties.

SUNY Poly did not respond with comments. Mercer Properties representatives did not return phone calls, and nobody at Columbia Development's office was willing to speak.

Since SUNY Poly split from UAlbany in 2013, the campus has admittedly wanted to build its own dormitories, according to news releases on its website.

A post on its site from Jan. 23, 2016 sourced from the San Francisco Chronicle says, "SUNY Polytechnic Institute in Albany is again looking for proposals from construction firms and

developers to build its first dorm at its Fuller Road campus."

SUNY Poly, a college specializing in nanotechnology, even has its own non-for-profit entity created to manage its real estate dealings dubbed Fuller Road Management Corporation. According to its 2013 tax filing, its most recent year, the company had \$241.7 million in net assets.

It also compensated Columbia Development \$325,000 for project management, but the project specifics are unlisted.

That same year, Fuller Road Management listed Alain Kaloyeros, president and CEO of SUNY Poly, as its director. Recently, however, he has stepped down from the position, according to media reports such as the Feb. 24, 2016 article in Albany Business Review.

"Whatever vendor is selected to take on that project, I think he needs to have an arm's length away — he's the president of the university," Israel said in reference to Kaloyeros.

As for the development, Israel thinks all the parties need to get orientated first before anything is settled.

"Fuller Road Management Corp., and Columbia, and Mercer — they've got to figure that all out," he said.

He went on, "Someone is going to develop that property at some point, so what I'm keeping an eye out for is the scope of that development and if there is an opportunity to partner, or is just a matter of protecting our interests?"

The situation between SUNY Poly and the cemeteries breathes new life into the phrase 'over my dead body.'

CEMETERY

Continued from Page 1

“They’re not moving them — we’re not going away,” Israel said of the cemeteries. “There’s too many graves, they’ve been there for too long. Those cemeteries will be there forever, and ever and ever.”

He also brought up the possible construction of sound barriers as a means of separating the college and the cemeteries.

The cemeteries were on Fuller Road well before UAlbany and long before nanotechnology in Albany was even a thought. Some graves date back to the early 19th century.

Back in the 1960’s Fuller Road was made out of dirt and the nearest neighbor of the cemeteries at that time was a golf course, on the back end of the State University. ~~Jim Hughes~~, an employee at Albany Hall of Records, said that the land that is currently SUNY Poly was a pig farm at one point.

If, however, the purchasing of the land by Mercer Properties does lead to construction of dorms or other projects, it may mean bad news for the cemeteries.

Sacklo remembers the impact of past construction projects, such as the creation of the sidewalk on Fuller Road, the roundabout and the building of SUNY Poly.

All of the projects, he recalls, caused “minor earthquakes” and disrupted the soil in the area around the cemetery, disturbing the gravesites and some of their markers.

“We put in several thousands of dollars straightening these stones,” he said. “We’re paying a fortune to right these stones — there’s no more money left.”

The sidewalks and the roundabout have blocked off the entrance to Independent Benevolent Society’s cemetery chapel, so the group has been forced to build a new route to the backdoor of the building to make it the new front door and equip it with proper materials to make it handicap accessible.

“We’re doing nothing but spending money to make the State University happy,” Sacklo said.

So far, there isn’t any discussion of the development of Mercer Properties’ new land.

“There’s no activity, there’s no contact, there’s nothing. It’s very much quiet,” Israel said.

His goal is to avoid conflict, still hoping that whatever is decided, the larger entities take the time to consider the interests of the cemeteries, but added, “certainly we’re the small fish here.”