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News

State halts work at Gary cemeteries

May 30, 2001

By Steve Patterson / Post-Tribune staff writer



GARY — State officials have ordered a stop to restoration work that has caused substantial damage at two Tolleston cemeteries.

Workers hired by Calumet Township Trustee Dozier T. Allen were back at work Tuesday, a day after a Post-Tribune story detailed desecrated graves, smashed headstones and disturbed grave sites throughout Tolleston and Forest Hill cemeteries, both near the intersection of 19th Avenue and Grant Street.

But they likely won't be back on site today, as officials from the Indiana Department of Natural Resources' division of archaeology/historic preservation have asked that no further restoration efforts be carried out until their investigation is complete.

An investigator from the DNR's Michigan City office conducted an initial investigation Friday and provided enough details to state officials that archaeologists and other investigators will be on site this week to survey it further.

The cemeteries, home to settlers of the Tolleston area, was active from the late 1800s to the 1950s.

Allen said despite being in office for decades, he only recently learned Indiana law requires trustees to care for abandoned or neglected cemeteries.

That prompted him to ask the City Council for \$1 million to fix up those two cemeteries, among other capital improvements at his office.

But by the time the council granted delivery of those casino funds to Allen's office, the work —

and damage —

had already begun.

Last week, headstones were found submerged in fresh black soil, while tire tracks were visible throughout much of the cemeteries. Some grave sites have been wiped out, with no proof there was ever anyone buried on one half of Tolleston Cemetery.

Less than a half-dozen headstones remain marking graves in the Forest Hill Cemetery, as substantial excavation work is obvious throughout that area just west of Waldheim Cemetery. That fenced-in cemetery, which is on the state's historic register, has gone undisturbed by the restoration work being carried out by Allen's office.

Gary-based Geo. A&L Contractors Unlimited did not return several calls seeking comment on the work, which state archaeologist Rick Jones said requires permits and a thorough investigation before it can begin.

That wasn't done with this project, something Allen chalked up to his office's lack of knowledge on how to properly care for cemeteries. He also admitted proper equipment wasn't used in the effort.

Tuesday, workers were using shovels to spread dirt by hand over areas where cemetery headstones once stood. In addition, several of the damaged headstones photographed by the Post-Tribune last week with tire tracks running over them have been picked up and set upright.

Jones said after his investigation is complete, felony charges could result due to the lack of proper permits for the work.



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