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## Bayside Cemetery cleanup to finish soon

by Anna Gustafson , Assistant Editor

Efforts to clean up Bayside Cemetery in Ozone Park could be finished as early as this summer, and the Manhattan synagogue that owns the land has begun working on a long-term maintenance plan designed to ensure the area will never again fall into the disrepair that characterized it for years.

"The cleanup is progressing very well," said Russell Steinthal, a board member and chair of the cemetery committee for the Congregation Shaare Zedek, an Upper West Side synagogue that has owned the Jewish cemetery since the early 1840s. "We look forward to maintaining the cemetery, and I hope the community is finding the better appearance of the cemetery a good thing."

One of the oldest burial grounds in New York, Bayside Cemetery is the final resting place for about 35,000 Jews, including Civil War soldiers. The cemetery does still accept some burials, though of late there are usually just one or two a year at most, Steinthal said.

The cemetery long ago fell into disrepair, including felled headstones, and a project by the synagogue and the Community Association for Jewish At-Risk Cemeteries, or CAJAC, to clean it began about two years ago, thanks to a grant from the UJA Federation of New York.

"The major priority right now is to finish the cleanup that's been started, really making sure every grave in Bayside is exposed to the light of day," CAJAC Director Andrew Schultz said. "Still, when you walk into the Bayside Cemetery the day every weed has been pulled, you'll still say the cemetery looks distraught because there are numerous headstones that are overturned. The first phase it to get the landscaping portion under control and then permanent maintenance."

CAJAC works with about six cemeteries in the New York metropolitan area and was originally founded to work on Bayside's restoration, Schultz said.

Schultz praised the synagogue, which has drawn ire from some who say it did not protect the cemetery, and said it has been a "cooperative partner" in the restoration process. He noted that the congregation recently entered into a contract with a company that does both cleanup work and long-term maintenance.

There are two pending lawsuits against Shaare Zedek right now that allege the organization failed to maintain the property.

"This class action lawsuit is brought on behalf of all persons or entities who purchased a perpetual care or annual care contract from [Congregation Shaare Zedek]," reads the suit filed by Steven Leventhal on Jan. 13. "While headstones at Bayside Cemetery read 'Gone but not forgotten,' defendants have all but forgotten the cemetery and refuse to honor perpetual care or annual care contracts which were entered into in accordance with New York and Jewish law."

Steinthal had no comment on the litigation.

Steinthal said the congregation, upon purchasing the cemetery in the early 1840s, divided the land among 100 different burial societies, synagogues and other similar organizations.

Those groups were then allowed to bury their members in the cemetery provided they maintained their areas.

However, Steinthal noted, many of those groups became defunct and no longer maintained their sections of the cemetery. This, Steinthal said, was one of the principal reasons it fell into poor shape.

"The synagogue, as owner of the cemetery, ended up with the burden of maintenance, and the revenues weren't there to sustain those sections," Steinthal said.



A project launched two years ago to clean up Bayside Cemetery in Ozone Park should finish this summer, according to a group involved with the restoration of the area that has fallen into disrepair. FILE PHOTO

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