

## Katy Prairie cemetery to offer ‘green’ burials



Photos by Melissa Philip / Staff Photographer

Wesley Newman, Katy Prairie Conservancy conservation director, talks about some of the grasses at the Indiagrass Preserve in Waller. The conservancy hasn't picked a location for its green cemetery yet but say the preserve is a good example of what it will look like.

## Biodegradable caskets, GPS-marked graves can help preserve the land

By Emily Foxhall  
STAFF WRITER

Elisa Donovan has been thinking about what happens to bodies after people die — about the chemicals that funeral home workers use to embalm them. The metal caskets and concrete vaults that house them in the earth. The fertilizers and pesticides that are scattered and sprayed above on cemetery lawns.

She's questioned what this means for the environment and probed how to offer another way.

Donovan isn't the first to promote the concept of “green” burials, which involve burying people in the ground without toxic chemicals and in biodegradable containers such as woven caskets or linen shrouds. But the cemetery that she and others at the Katy Prairie Conservancy are creating adds a new twist. The conservancy protects land. Their cemetery will too.

This so-called “conservation cemetery” would be the first in Texas and one of fewer than a dozen in the country, at least as certified by the Green Burial Council. The designation guarantees that not only will green burials occur there but also that the land will be legally conserved into the future in its natural state. They hope it might be replicated elsewhere and generate funds to preserve more areas, too.

“It just makes sense,” said Donovan, who serves as vice president and general counsel for the conservancy. “The idea that a cemetery lasts forever, and has to be maintained forever. And land trusts like the Katy Prairie Conservancy, that’s our mission too.”

The nonprofit land trust’s aim is to preserve the prairies and wetlands that conservancy president and chief executive officer Mary Anne Piacentini calls the “iconic landscape of this region.”

The conservancy has protected more than 24,000 acres so far, much of it west of the city of Houston. It bought some of the land. As for the rest, legal agreements called conservation easements leave properties with their owners but guarantee the natural land is protected.

Much of the original prairie, of course, has already been



The Katy Prairie Conservancy plans to start selling plots in its conservation cemetery next year.

paved over and developed. So as the Houston metropolitan region stretches outward, Donovan feels an urgent need to protect even more. The restored and natural landscape improves air and water quality and reduces flooding, which remains a major issue in the region. Plus, the plants capture carbon from the atmosphere, which can help fight climate change.

When she heard Donovan’s idea, Piacentini at first wasn’t sure how it would help. Then the

full picture emerged, of natural burials with GPS coordinates and maybe small markers to locate the graves and a beautiful, wild grassland sprawling on the soil. There could be walking trails and a gathering space, diverse plants and wildlife habitat, with something to marvel at year-round. Maybe other preserved properties would buffer it.

The bodies, buried this way, will decompose quickly into the surrounding soil, Donovan explained. So the conservancy be-

lieves natural burial is still the safest method for protecting water quality, keeping chemicals away from the ground, even if a flood were to occur. They plan to pick a site away from water sources and outside floodplains.

And those at the conservancy had models to look to: Conservation cemeteries date back to the 1990s, when Ramsey Creek Preserve opened a burial ground on 33 acres west of Greenville, S.C. Others followed, including the Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery in Gainesville, Fla., where graves spaced among 93 acres of forest and meadows are marked with small brass disks and the land is open to hiking, biking and horseback riding.

Arguably, natural burial was occurring long before anyone dreamed up chemically preserving bodies, but it’s increasingly being considered as a choice again in America, said Freddie Johnson, executive director of the Prairie Creek cemetery. Sometimes natural burials occur at modern cemeteries. Conservation burial takes the option to a higher standard, combining it with the preservation of the land. The cemeteries can work with existing funeral homes, which refrigerate the bodies until they

are buried.

Johnson was glad to see support and awareness grow around an idea that he considers so beneficial. People commonly call him to ask about it, he said. And he finds it meaningful and fulfilling to help, especially after he wondered at the beginning: “Maybe I’m the only one that thinks this is very exciting.”

Increasing interest in the idea comes down to education around it, especially in a society where talking about death doesn’t come easily, said Caitlyn Hauke, president of the Green Burial Council International board of directors. They’ve now certified 30 natural burial sites and 49 hybrid sites. Hauke finds that people, after considering the concept, decide,

“This totally makes sense.”

When the conservancy pitched the idea to a firm called Quantified Ventures, Piacentini didn’t know if those at the company would like it or think it strange. But the conservancy entered and won a competition that the firm offered, and Quantified Ventures will now advise it on developing and financing the project. The proposal surprised the company, explained Dan Yeoman, the company’s chief financial and strategy officer.

“We were all intrigued by the concept of conservation cemetery that can both preserve and restore threatened land while meeting a growing interest in natural burials,” Yeoman wrote. “When we discussed the long-term potential for the idea — and its ability to fund significantly more conservation beyond the initial cemetery site — we were ready to go.”

The conservancy hasn’t determined yet where exactly the cemetery will be, but a recent visit to the organization’s Indiagrass Preserve offered a glimpse of what it might be like. A gravel path snaked through the landscape. Insects hummed. The sun reflected the gentle hues of little bluestem, green shocks of switchgrass, red and yellow petals of Indian blanket on the rolling soil.

Plots are expected to go on sale in 2022, one last way in Donovan’s mind to leave behind a better world.



Wesley Newman and Mary Anne Piacentini of the Katy Prairie Conservancy are pursuing a cemetery that preserves what they call the “iconic landscape of this region.”