

ZONING CHANGE REVIEW SHEET

CASE NUMBER: C14H-2025-0117

HLC DATE: January 7, 2026 PC DATE: February 10, 2026 CC Date: August 27, 2026

APPLICANT: Historic Landmark Commission (owner-supported)

HISTORIC NAME: Bethany Cemetery

WATERSHED: Fort Branch, Tannehill Branch

ADDRESS OF PROPOSED ZONING CHANGE: 1308 Springdale Road

ZONING CHANGE: P-NP to P-H-NP ([East MLK Combined NP](#))

COUNCIL DISTRICT: 1

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: Grant the proposed zoning change from public-neighborhood plan (P-NP) to public-neighborhood plan-historic landmark (P-H-NP) combining district zoning for 5.77 acres.

QUALIFICATIONS FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION: community value, landscape features, and historical associations

HISTORIC LANDMARK COMMISSION ACTION: **September 19, 1977** – Postpone the historic zoning case to October 17, 1977, to notify ownership and solicit City maintenance quote (10-0). **October 17, 1977** – Postpone the historic zoning case for 90 days to further investigate maintenance options (8-2). **July 3, 2024** – Initiate historic zoning with owner support, sponsored by Vice-Chair Evans and Commissioner Rubio (10-0, timed out without further action). **November 7, 2025** - Initiate historic zoning with owner support, sponsored by Vice-Chair Evans and Commissioner Koch (10-0). **January 8, 2026** – Recommend historic zoning (11-0).

PLANNING COMMISSION ACTION: Recommend historic zoning (11-0).

CITY COUNCIL ACTION:

CASE MANAGER: Kalan Contreras, 512-974-2727

NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZATIONS: Austin Independent School District, Austin Neighborhoods Council, Del Valle Community Coalition, East Austin Conservancy, East MLK Combined Neighborhood Plan Contact Team, Friends of Austin Neighborhoods, Friends of Northeast Austin, Homeless Neighborhood Association, Martin Luther King Neighborhood Association, Overton Family Committee, Preservation Austin, Residents of E 12th St

DEPARTMENT COMMENTS: The case was initiated in 1977 by the Historic Landmark Commission at the request of activist and organizer Evelyn Taylor Ross, but did not proceed to recommendation to PC and Council after a series of postponements. It was initiated again in 2024 but timed out due to missing case materials.

The staff recommendation for the area of H zoning has been amended to reflect City surveyors' June 24, 2026 confirmation of the cemetery boundaries, referenced in Ordinance No. 20231130-110 as the "4ward survey." Relevant exhibits and the surveyors' sketch is included in backup. The new area requested for rezoning comprises 5.77 acres, rather than the 6.25 acres referenced in the legal description filed with TCAD.

BASIS FOR RECOMMENDATION:

§ 25-2-352(3)(c)(ii) Historical Associations. *The property has long-standing significant associations with persons, groups, institutions, businesses, or events of historical importance that contributed significantly to the history of the city, state, or nation or represents a significant portrayal of the cultural practices or the way of life of a definable group of people in a historic time.*

As a physical representation of African American heritage, as well as a space both physically and culturally linked with some of Austin's most prominent residents, Bethany Cemetery is eligible for designation as a City of Austin historic landmark. Historian Emily Payne describes the cemetery's importance in her 2025 narrative:

The individuals associated with Bethany Cemetery include the founders of the Bethany Cemetery Company, the founder of the Bethany Cemetery Association, the women who assumed leadership of the cemetery in the twentieth century, and the individuals interred in the cemetery... [who] hold rich associations with many facets of Black social and community life in East Austin—from religious development to business to community outreach to political and military service. Bethany Cemetery is unique as a single physical place that unites these individual stories, bringing together a sweeping narrative about the struggles and strivings entailed in creating Austin's Black community.... It is the oldest known example of a Black cemetery in Austin and includes individuals whose stories of enslavement and emancipation are critical to preserve. The stories embodied at Bethany Cemetery are unique because they illustrate Black communal effort and perseverance in the absence of public support...Many individuals interred at Bethany Cemetery represent significant facets of the Black experience in Austin...Historically, Black genealogies and accomplishments were under-documented in official governmental records and newspapers – especially in nineteenth-century Texas.¹

Payne also notes that the National Trust for Historic Preservation acknowledges that cemeteries often serve as the only documentation of many significant Black stories:

Cemeteries, along with churches and schools, were some of the first institutions founded by African Americans after the Civil War. Developed by various coalitions, masonic groups, or benevolent associations, they became cornerstones of newly freed communities. Today, they are often a virtual time capsule that provides insight into the social, anthropological, and archaeological history of a community. Headstones may carry the names of little-known yet influential figures whose voices have been left out of the historical record.²

§ 25-2-352(3)(c)(iv) Community Value. *The property has a unique location, physical characteristic, or significant feature that contributes to the character, image, or cultural identity of the city, a neighborhood, or a particular group.*

Bethany cemeteries continued existence is a testament to the strength of the African American community in Austin in the face of public disinvestment, changing demographics, and displacement. For decades, community leaders have mobilized support for preserving Bethany Cemetery in spite of continued funding issues and general apathy from municipal bodies, fighting to ensure the continued survival of a sacred gathering space that has served Black Austin for 132 years. Payne describes these efforts below:

¹ Emily Thompson Payne. "Application for Historic Zoning: Bethany Cemetery," 2025.

² Nadia K. Orton, "Recovering and Preserving African American Cemeteries," from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2016 <https://savingplaces.org/stories/recovering-and-preserving-african-american-cemeteries>.

In addition, the property holds significant community value as a gathering place and sacred site for Austin's Black community...Despite ongoing maintenance challenges and a changing demographic with little generational connection to Austin, community leaders have been able to mobilize community support for Bethany Cemetery because of the pivotal role that cemeteries play in documenting and preserving Black history...Decades of community-driven volunteer leadership of Evelyn Taylor Ross, Idella Lewis, and Sue Spears epitomize the spirit of community value. Bethany Cemetery has also long served as a gathering place for the larger Black community in Austin.... Although people continued to maintain their own family plots, they sought assistance with care from county and city officials. Through their efforts and support of local African American organizations, they fenced the property, built a limestone entranceway and placed on its top an arch.... Similar community work was required to obtain an Official Texas Historical Marker, [and] the Texas Historical Commission's designation of Bethany Cemetery as a Historic Texas Cemetery.... In 2016, the Austin nonprofit organization Six Square—which supports Austin's Black cultural districts—organized a gathering called “The Homecoming” to celebrate and advocate for Austin's Black cemeteries. That event helped bring attention to the need for maintenance and protection for Bethany Cemetery.³

(v) Landscape Feature. *The property is a significant natural or designed landscape or landscape feature with artistic, aesthetic, cultural, or historical value to the city.*

In addition to its importance as the burial site of some of Austin's oldest and most prominent African American families, Bethany Cemetery's physical landscape is culturally significant. Its physical arrangement is consistent with African American burial traditions of the 19th and 20th centuries and beyond. It also contains a Unique collection of early concrete headstones, some of which predate the founding of Evergreen Cemetery and as such represent rare early examples in Austin.

The cemetery records depict the graves in a long, narrow arrangement. Individual burial plots border the cemetery on the north and south sides. Ten family-sized plots are separated by wide grassy pathways, referred to as alleys in the Bethany Cemetery Plat. All the graves are oriented on an east-west axis, a Southern Christian tradition. This common practice was founded on the belief that during the Second Coming, all souls will rise out of their graves and face Christ on Judgement Day. Similarly, from around 1900 through the 1920s, concrete headstones became popular in Black cemeteries nationwide and are found throughout Bethany Cemetery. Often, concrete headstones include embossed symbols like crosses or gates. Other headstones from this era are embossed with symbols from Black social and fraternal organizations, like the Knights of Pythias or the Odd Fellows.⁴

The Knights of Pythias, Odd Fellows, and other fraternal organization headstones are also potent symbols of community support. Their influence and charitable works helped to bolster Black families' resilience in an era when public institutions offered limited support for Black families and causes at best, often opposing it outrightly. The headstones thus show the spirit of grassroots organization in the segregation-era Austin and beyond. Like the surrounding wall and nameplate, they help to link the physical landscape with its inherent community value.

PARCEL NO.: 0210180514

LEGAL DESCRIPTION: 6.25 AC OF OLT 18&1/2 DIVISION B (Note: H zoning is limited to the 5.77 acres specified in backup.)

³ Payne 2025

⁴ Ibid.

ESTIMATED ANNUAL TAX EXEMPTION: N/A

APPRAISED VALUE: Land: \$12,251,250; Improvement: \$0; Total: \$12,251,250

PRESENT USE: Cemetery

DATE BUILT/PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE: 1893-1976

INTEGRITY/ALTERATIONS: High

PRESENT OWNERS: Bethany Cemetery Assn C/O Sue Spears, 7318 COLONY PARK DR AUSTIN TX 78724-4402

ORIGINAL OWNER(S): Bethany Cemetery Company

OTHER HISTORICAL DESIGNATIONS: Bethany Cemetery received a THC subject marker (Marker 12240) in 1997, after years of community-driven work. Its inscription reads: "This cemetery was established in the late 1800s when burial space set aside for African Americans in Austin's historic Oakwood Cemetery was no longer available. The oldest recorded burial is that of infant Hellen Moore in 1879. C. W. Jones purchased this land in 1892. The Bethany Cemetery Company, formed in 1893 by William Holland, Henderson Rollins, Allen Bradley and William M. Tears, maintained the site until 1933. In 1976, members of the Bethany Cemetery Association became caretakers of the 6.18-acre graveyard and improved the site, which still serves the area."⁵

In 2003, the Bethany Cemetery Association and community partnerships worked to achieve Bethany's designation as a Historic Texas Cemetery by the Texas Historical Commission (Cemetery ID TV-C062).⁶

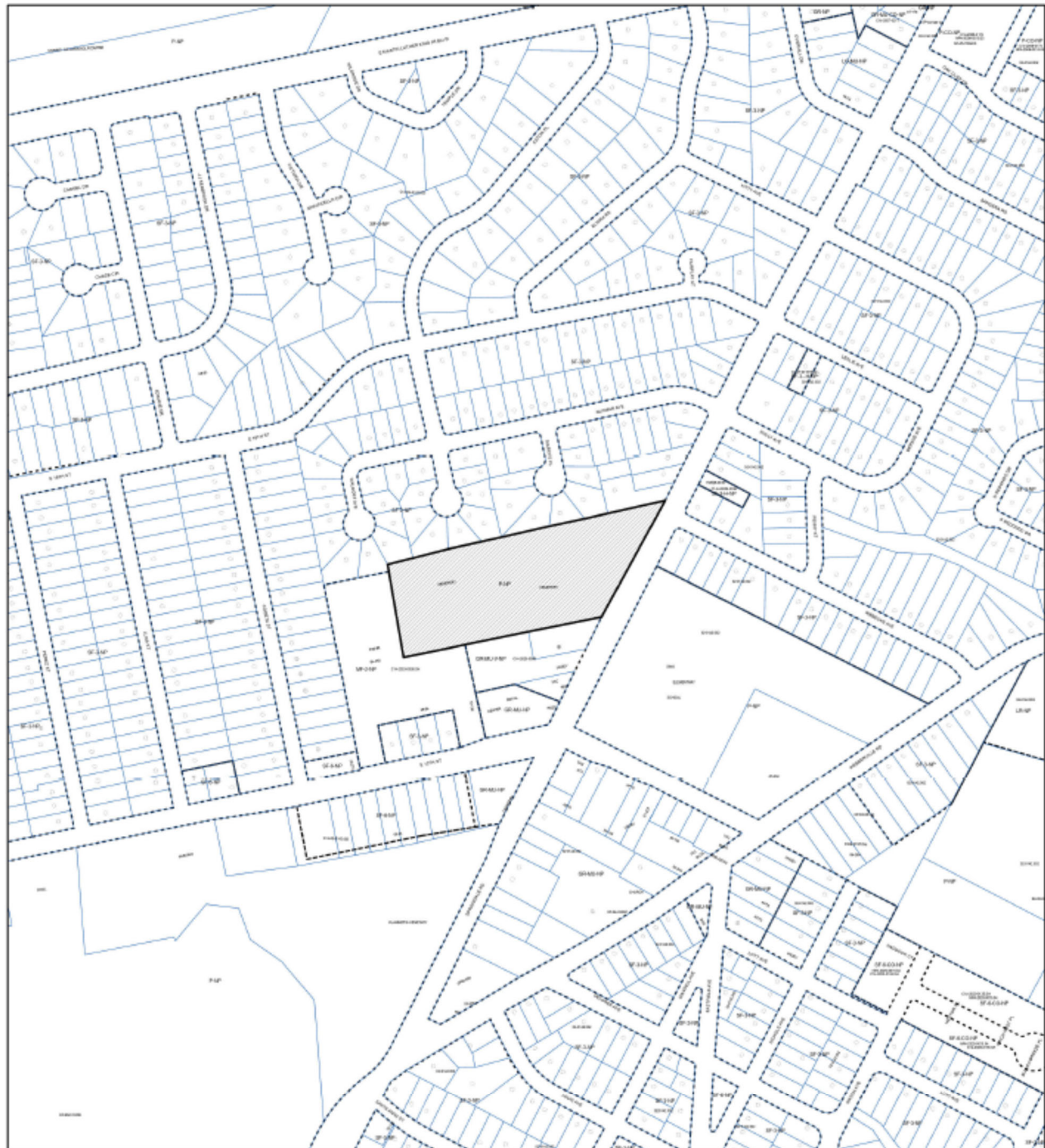
⁵ "Details - Bethany Cemetery - Atlas Number 5453012240 - Atlas: Texas Historical Commission," 2025. <https://atlas.thc.texas.gov/Details?atlasnumber=5453012240>.

⁶ "Details - Bethany Cemetery - Atlas Number 7453006205 - Atlas: Texas Historical Commission," 2025. <https://atlas.thc.texas.gov/Details?atlasnumber=7453006205>.



Photo: Emily Payne, 2025

Location Map



1:4,800

-  SUBJECT TRACT
-  PENDING CASE
-  ZONING BOUNDARY

HISTORIC ZONING

ZONING CASE#: C14H-2025-0117

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