

# City finds right way to help African memorial

**W**e applaud the City Council for advancing the worthy African Burying Ground project without asking Portsmouth property taxpayers for additional money.

In a unanimous vote Monday night, the council approved spending \$100,000 in Urban Development Action Grant money to jump start fund-raising efforts for the memorial and park, which it is estimated will cost between \$1 million and \$1.2 million. The city has \$3 million in federal UDAG funds dating back to construction of the Sheraton hotel. City Manager John Bohenko explained that these federal dollars were given to the city for economic development and community enhancement projects, and that the new memorial is an appropriate use. By way of precedent, the city contributed \$100,000 in UDAG money for the North Church steeple restoration.

The Burying Ground project began in October 2003, when workers digging on Chestnut Street found the remains of 13 people. Researchers quickly learned that as early as 1705, documents referred to the site as the "Negro Burying Ground." Archaeologists believe the site was used throughout the 1700s and DNA testing confirmed that those buried at the site were of African descent. Since the discovery, many in the community have been working diligently to determine the best way to honor those buried beneath Chestnut Street and preserve this important part of the city's history. It appears there is now consensus about what will be built.

Here's how the city describes the memorial:

"The roughly 6,500 square foot 'African Burying Ground Memorial Park — We Stand In Honor of Those Forgotten,' runs the length of Chestnut Street between Court Street and State Street and includes sculptural pieces, historical information, granite seating walls, a community plaza, decorative tiles, landscaping and pedestrian scale lighting. The Memorial Park is designed to serve as a contemplative public space, which informs visitors and honors those buried below."

There is a highly informative animated tour of the proposed park on the city Web site at [www.cityofportsmouth.com/abg/index.htm](http://www.cityofportsmouth.com/abg/index.htm).

Fund raisers use the acronym EMILY for the phrase Early Money Is Like Yeast, and so the council has given the project \$100,000 in additional leavening to raise the memorial from plan to reality. The project's proponents will now seek private donations, grants and other sources of funding. To date, \$126,000 has been spent on planning and design for the project. Art-Speak, the city's cultural commission, has stepped forward as the fiscal agent on the project and those who want to contribute can send donations to: African Burying Ground Trust Fund, c/o Art-Speak, 1 Junkins Ave., Portsmouth, NH 03801, with checks payable to "African Burying Ground Trust Fund."

We applaud the African Burying Ground Committee for pursuing its ambitious goals while remaining sensitive to the economic hardships many Portsmouth families continue to face due to lost jobs, wages and an economy that can't seem to shake off the lingering effects of the longest recession since the 1930s. The City Council has also found a way to support this important project without undermining its negotiating position as it makes the tough decisions needed to fulfill its pledge not to raise taxes.