

FINAL

**CITY OF LEBANON
BOARD OF CEMETERY TRUSTEES
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
REMOTE VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS
LebanonNH.gov/Live
TUESDAY, March 23, 2021
5:00 PM**

MEMBERS PRESENT: Chair Fran Hanchett, Vice Chair Antonio Palazzo, Caitlyn Hauke, David Muzzy, and Susan Painter

MEMBERS ABSENT: None

STAFF PRESENT: Pat McCarthy – Sexton, Paula Maville – Deputy City Manager

GUESTS: Patrick Healy

I. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 5:00 PM by Chair Fran Hanchett.
A Roll Call of Board Members who participated remotely is listed above.

Review of meeting procedures and NH RSA 91-A “Right-to-Know” requirements

Chair Hanchett delivered the Right to Know procedures to the Members and the public.

II. DISCUSSION ITEM: NATURAL BURIALS

A. Discussion with Director Patrick Healy, Green Mount Cemetery, Montpelier, VT

Mr. Healy gave an overview of the Green Mount Cemetery. He is the Director of a very hilly, 40 acres cemetery, and has been with the cemetery for 33 years. He has been involved a varying capacity with the New England Cemetery Association and the Vermont Cemetery Association. He described natural burials and offered guidance from his experience. His definition is the burial of a non-embalmed body at a depth of not shallower than 3.5 feet. It is buried within a wood or wicker casket, shroud or other cloth covering. The objective is to compost the body as naturally as possible. He has done eight natural burials. It is imperative that the natural burial takes place as quickly as possible, even during the winter. As the time of death nears, family should inform cemetery employees so they can get the grave open and the site prepared. He finds that pre-need planning is essential for everyone involved. He spends time with the family or purchaser of the lot to inform them in advance how natural burials differ from traditional burials. He said the back fill is important for microbial activity. They backfill with a compost and sand mix that they make. They sometimes add a layer of hay before the body is placed in the grave. They do not use a casket lowering device because it creates an air space between the body and the bottom of the grave. They use a rough-cut piece of lumber with 100% natural rope straps to lower the body and they bury everything along with the body. How the body will be moved to the grave has to be determined in advance and needs enough people available for the weight of the body. He is not sure if the family can do this in New Hampshire or if it needs to be done by a funeral director. If the body is in a shroud or has a covering, there may be stains on it and there may be some odor because the body starts decomposing within 2 hours. One service used incense and that could mask the odor. The back fill of sand and compost is partially filled in by the family, if they want to, and the staff usually completes the work. It is important to move the body from the vehicle to the grave site as quickly as possible, especially if it is not in a casket or wicker basket. When his staff is involved, they move the body and leave it on top the

ground until the service. The natural grave lot size is increased to 5 feet wide, to eliminate the possibility of digging into another grave. Every natural burial grave has a grass marker to keep track of the location of the grave. They have permitted natural graves within the traditional areas of the cemetery however; they have a new section specific for natural burials. They do not permit upright monuments, just level grass markers. That area will only be mowed once a year just to clean it up. They want to avoid problems with mice and ticks. One of the biggest concerns he initially had was grave site disturbance, but they have not had problems with any animals digging up any of the remains. Others across the country have not seen that problem either. He recommends starting slowly with a small separate section to see how it goes. If it goes well the Board can consider incorporating natural burials with the traditional cemetery sections.

The Board was given the opportunity to ask questions of Mr. Healy. Mr. Palazzo sent Mr. Healy a list of questions. He is concerned about liability and cost. He asked about the extra steps, pre-need planning, making compost, different straps, moving the body and more. He asked how much extra time is required for a natural burial than a traditional burial. Mr. Healy has not done the time analysis, but he is thinking that it may take less time. He always does pre-need planning with every burial. They have more flexibility because the hole is shallower and does not depend on anyone else or the vault company. They always make their own compost for use in the cemetery. They have done 8 natural burials, but he feels it is easier in his mind to do a natural burial than the traditional burial. The cost of the ropes and boards are about \$20, less than waiting on the vault company and bringing out the machine to lower the body. Mr. Palazzo said he is concerned about the extra expense for overtime for the staff doing the work. Mr. McCarthy said they are open 7 days a week. Lebanon charges full burials at \$450 on weekdays, \$700 on weekends and \$875 on holidays. Anything after regular business hours is another \$100 per hour. Green Mount charges \$950 on weekdays and an extra \$350 on weekends for traditional burials. They are charging \$1200 for natural burials in the summer and \$1400 in the Winter. This allows for the extra procedures, time, and materials.

Mr. Muzzy asked if any of the natural burials have been in the traditional cemetery. There have been 5 and the first one was a year ago in January. They have seen some settling, but when they started they were digging the graves too wide. Some people have been buried in a wicker casket and it can be narrower, about 30 inches wide. In the natural section, they back filled some of the graves after a short time. In the summertime there was some shrinkage in a couple of weeks. In the winter they wait for Spring. The amount of rain affects the settling. In the Winter, they place bales of hay over the body to keep the ground from freezing. This allows the body to continue to decompose. Albeit slower than in the warmer weather. Because the sand packs tighter, there appears to be less shrinkage. They are not concerned with the natural burials within the traditional cemetery. They are not replacing the sod. In the summer, a few days after the burial, they water the ground to eliminate air spaces to compress the soil.

Ms. Painter asked how the plots and graves are sold. The graves are sold as single or multiple grave plots at one time. They are giving each plot extra room and he will send the Board a sketch of the area. The plots are on a steep slope, are sold left to right, and there are 4 rows of plots planned. There are trees interspersed between some of the plots. They are selling the lot next to the last lot that was sold and there is no choice to be placed in a different or selected location. Within the traditional cemetery and traditional burials, they have a choice of the location.

Ms. Hauke asked if the natural burials are an easy addition or was it challenging. Mr. Healy feels comfortable with the process and may do it himself. In the beginning he fought the State's bill to allow natural burials and was not supportive. He was afraid of all the things that could potentially go wrong. He held a public information meeting that was attended by 50 people who supported natural burials. At first there was some trepidation on the part of the Director, but after several burials, he is comfortable with the option.

Mr. Palazzo asked for more information about the costs. Mr. Healy only has one other staff member and has not analyzed the cost. He would have to understand the staffing in Lebanon and the worker's union to help Lebanon determine the potential costs. He offered to help the Sexton with the cost analysis. In the recent past, Green Mount's cemetery staff have stood back and let the family participate in the burial as much as they want. He does offer to help the family move the body if needed. The dirt is there for the family to shovel in some of the dirt, but the staff usually finishes the job. He is not concerned about the liability related to involving the family.

Mr. McCarthy says they operate 9 cemeteries and maintain 1 private owned Jewish cemetery. There is an on-call service to notify Staff that there is a need for a burial. The arrangements for the funeral are handled by the funeral home. The City just sells the grave site. City staff are not allowed to meet with or counsel the family, according to NH law. There are some differences between Vermont and New Hampshire rules and laws. The Green Mount Cemetery rules state that the family is responsible for moving the body, but he has been willing to help the family. If the family takes charge, they fulfill the role of the funeral director. The family is responsible to move the body. The staff once used their mini excavator when the body weighed too much to be moved by people. Mr. McCarthy asked how a waiver of liability is addressed, and as yet, Mr. Healy has not done so. However, other places have a process and requirement to complete the waivers. They have also stated in their rules that it will require a court order to move the body once it has been buried.

Ms. Painter asked if there is any plan to reuse the graves. Green Mount does not intend to do so. In Germany, they reuse the graves after 20 years. The bones are dug up and placed in a separate area. Mr. Healy said if the body did not decompose correctly, it can be a nasty situation. He would allow the burial of a cremated body on top of a natural burial, in the same plot, but not if it is in an urn. They place the cremated remains a couple of feet deep and their plots are large enough to place the remains at the head or the foot as well.

There has not been any special training for Mr. Healy or his staff. They are learning as they go, and things are getting better. Mr. Muzzy asked if a funeral home is required to be involved. Most of the burials have involved a funeral home and the home brings the body, but it is not required. The funeral directors know how to handle decomposing bodies and Mr. Healy is not concerned about the sanitation of the hearse. The funeral home registers the burial transit permit and the staff person at the cemetery brings it to the Town Clerk to register it. There is not much fluid from the body as it decomposes, it penetrates the back fill and does not move away. The body dries up faster than when it is in a vault.

Ms. Hauke asked if he has concerns about handling bodies carrying disease in natural burials. He is a little concerned, but he believes diseases are alive when the body is alive, but once it is dead there is less worry of transmittal. Mr. McCarthy asked if there are any bodies that they would turn away due to disease or treatments that bodies have undergone. Mr. Healy said he does not have an answer about this. He believes the ground and microbial action is a good thing. He would not turn down any body that was in a casket, so he does not believe he would turn anyone away. Mr. McCarthy noted that in a casket there would be a vapor barrier that would prohibit transmittal. It is an interesting question that needs further research. Mr. McCarthy asked if there is potential of seepage between the graves, even if they are 5 feet wide. The goal is to get the body decomposed as quickly as possible, so hopefully with the right soil and moisture content of the land it would not be a problem. If it is clay soil and the moisture content of the land is high, it may have more potential problems.

Mr. Palazzo asked about issues with the Union. Lebanon employees are union members. So far there are 2 employees at Green Mount, they are untrained, they have only done 8 burials and the oldest burial is only one year old. Mr. Palazzo suggested setting up a separate cemetery and hiring someone such as Mr. Healy to contract for the natural burials. The question remains if there is a market for natural burials. Mr. Healy noted that most of the natural burials would have opted for cremation and it is hard to say what the

actual market is for natural burials.

Ms. Painter asked if his city is supportive of the natural burials. Mr. Healy said in general, the citizens are supportive, so long as there are choices. He has not noticed any push back from anyone. Last year the area looked very natural because they only mowed a small portion of the grass and people liked it.

Last year Mr. Healy did about 50 traditional burials, and 50% were full burials. At other times, almost 80% were cremations. There is always someone on the cemetery grounds to communicate with visitors and family. He does not know how many people would want a natural burial and or if they would be living close enough to allow for a natural burial.

Ms. Hauke asked if he learned anything that he would do different. Mr. Healy studied natural burials for a couple of years before they started doing them. They started slow, they did not announce it and they did not advertise natural burials. It helped that they have moved slow. It is hard to meet all the terms of a fully natural burial as people want to be able to drive close, have water spickets, and need a pathway to the graves.

They are not mounding the grave sites because they want things to settle as soon as possible and they like to water the grave to help it settle. When there is mounding with their soil, the water runs off instead of settling. The dirt remains soft and they monitor the natural section. They do not intend to mow, but will put wildflowers over the graves, so perfect leveling is not essential.

Mr. McCarthy asked how they would handle a body with a communicable disease if they were not informed until after the body was handled. Mr. Healy said he would call Human Resources, seek guidance and medical advice, and do any necessary testing. Mr. Healy notifies the family if there is any disturbance such as a road wash out or a monument vandalism. It would be the same for animal disturbance. It still seems that there is no disturbance from animals, although there was an incidence of bears in Russia that did disturb graves. Mr. McCarthy noted a time when a body that was 12 feet deep was found by a cadaver dog.

Mr. McCarthy asked about different fee structures for traditional and natural burials and if it is discriminative to charge a different rate for a natural burial than a regular burial. Mr. Healy said he has not had any push back on the cost and he does not believe it is discriminatory to charge a different rate, because the process and needs are different. And if that is a problem, he would raise the rate of the traditional burials.

Mr. Saine, a member of the public, asked about the wicker and wood caskets and how the extra air space impacts the natural burials related to sink holes. Mr. Healy asks people to walk directly from the road to the grave plot and they should not encounter sink holes. Mostly, the cemetery people need to keep an eye on the graves. So far, they have only used funeral homes to transfer the body. They are planning for the options that would be appropriate if a family wants to move the body to the cemetery.

Mr. McCarthy asked if they are concerned that after 15 or 20 years a casket might collapse and cause a problem with a mower or machine going over it. It possibly is a concern, so they are paying attention to all the graves. In the case of Muslim graves, they have filled the casket with dirt and did not leave the cover on the vault. In most cases, people who want a natural burial do not want a casket, usually a shroud or a wicker basket. All the natural graves have grass markers and they may resort to noting on the stones if there is a natural burial in the location. The outlier, the one unnoticed natural burial, can be a problem because it is not anticipated in a traditional location.

Mr. Healy said some of their assistance comes from a correction facility, since 1982. He is the Director and there is one staff person for the cemetery. The people from the correction facility do lawn

maintenance and if needed, they can assist with burials. They do not always have inmate assistance.

Mr. Boisvert, a member of the public, asked if traditional burials require a vault or outer container. They do require vaults for caskets, but not for urns. They have a liability form for a cremation. If the remains are not in an urn, they will not handle the remains in the future. Mr. Boisvert has worked in the cemeteries for many years. He has seen collapses on adjacent grave sites during a separate burial ceremony. If there is a void from a gasket, there is potential for a collapse. This is a concern if natural burials are allowed in all the cemetery areas. Mr. Healy said he is not worried about it if the body is in a wicker casket and they are using a sand mixture that really packs. It should be one of the concerns if they are mixed in with other traditional burial areas. He believes a sheet or a shroud over the body is the most desirable and a wicker casket follows. A wood casket is the least desirable for a natural burial. And keeping staff protected with vaccinations is essential.

Ms. Painter clarified that this Board is not considering putting natural burials within the traditional burial settings. It is not being considered at this time.

There were no additional questions from the Board or the public. Mr. Healy said he looks forward to meeting with the Sexton and the Board in the future if the Board decides to continue discussing natural burials.

B. Continued Review of Draft Outline of Proposed Amendments

Ms. Painter suggested that the Board continue to consider all the information that they just learned and not discuss the proposed amendments at this time.

III. ADJOURNMENT

***Vice Chair Palazzo MOVED for adjournment.
Seconded by Ms. Painter.***

Roll Call Vote

Vice Chair Palazzo, Mr. Muzzy, Ms. Hauke, Ms. Painter, and Chair Hanchett all voting Yea.

None voted Nay.

****The Vote on the Motion was unanimously approved (5-0).***

The meeting was adjourned at 6:39 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,
Linda Billings
Recording Secretary