

Death joins the green movement

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Staff Reporter

KILLALOE — Council in Killaloe, Hagarty, Richards (KHR) is considering a proposal from Green Burial Ottawa Valley (GBOV) for a green burial site in the township.

The group, which has 240 members, is asking the township to reactivate a currently disused cemetery operated by the township on Wildlife Road near Heritage Road and beside the existing Anglican cemetery. Spencer said the Anglican church has provided a letter indicating it is willing to donate land to double the size of the municipal cemetery.

Megan Spencer, chair of the GBOV board, explained the concept of green burial and the principles adherents of the practice believe in. The purpose is a more natural and environmentally friendly process.

She walked council through the five tenets of green burial: the body is not embalmed, is buried directly in the ground in just a shroud or biodegradable casket, burial is only three to four feet deep rather than the typical six feet, the site is maintained in as natural a state as possible, markers are flat to the ground or a communal marker.

No metal or concrete liner is used to contain the casket, allowing full decomposition of the remains.

“This is sometimes thought of as a new concept,” said Spencer, “but green burial is essentially returning to the way we buried people 100 years ago.”

Spencer told council there are 300 green burial sites in both the United Kingdom and United States while Canada has about 40. Most of the sites in Canada are in British Columbia and southern Ontario.

Spencer said that green burial is a less expensive option both for the families of the deceased and organizations, including municipalities, which need to maintain the sites.

Spencer said some of the existing green burial sites are used by students and naturalist groups and that new bird species have been seen in some areas because the sites are maintained in a natural state. There are even beehives at one site.

“It’s just an example,” she said, “of how much community engagement can occur at a cemetery.”

Spencer said burial at all, never mind green burial, for non-church members is difficult in Killaloe and Renfrew county more broadly, because there are few non-denominational

cemeteries in the area. She said there are people who opt for cremation who would prefer a green burial and cited an Angus Reid poll from 2022 in Ontario which found 67 per cent of men and 70 per cent of women would consider a green burial, with 66 per cent of people overall in eastern Ontario.

Mark Richardson, manager of cemetery services, with the City of Niagara Falls offered his perspective on why Niagara Falls opted to offer green burial options. He said it was something he believed strongly in and that they had community support, “but not to the extent that I’m seeing here.”

He said that, in his discussions with other communities, green burial sites are being developed because people in the community spoke up and said they wanted it. He said in Niagara Falls, green burial sites account for about 15 per cent of total burial site sales.

Charlotte Dextraze, a board member with CBOV, said there’s a growing interest in returning to traditional ways of doing things, “people are wanting to relearn old skills like knitting and sewing and that’s part of the movement, too. Just going back to what was normal and natural.”

She said the awareness of climate change is also playing a role as people try to live more environmentally consciously.

“We’re bombarded by climate change,” said Dextraze, “so it’s a way for us to feel like (burial) isn’t going to add to pollution.”

just under 312,000 people died in Canada in 2021, according to Statistics Canada. Those numbers translate to about 129 million kilograms of carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere by the death care industry.

Council response

Coun. Maureen MacMillan, with confirmation from chief administrative officer Tammy Gorgerat, said a letter from township council indicated the land on Wildlife Road is not deeded to the township. She also asked about grant options for the site and Spencer responded that there are several green initiative grants available that could support the proposal. Richardson said he accessed a grant program when Niagara Falls was launching one of its green burial sites.

Gorgerat presented her findings related to launching the proposed site as a green burial location which may transfer of ownership of the land to the township and other matters like insurance.

Coun. Bil Smith asked, rhetorically, what would happen with the green burial site if GBOV ceased to exist. Gorgerat posed the same question and asked if GBOV may be able to partner with the Anglican church which owns the adjoining plot of land to operate the green burial site. Spencer said the church had said it would not operate the cemetery.

A representative of the Anglican church said the church would be happy to co-operate with GBOV on providing the land but that it did not have the resources to operate the cemetery. He also said the ecological benefits of green burial are appealing to the church.

Mayor David Mayville told council that the township received 33 emails in support of green burial.

Mayville offered a resolution to establish a committee to study the matter further in concert with GBOV.

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Megan Spencer, chair Green Burial Ottawa Valley, left, presents to Killaloe, Hagarty, Richards council about the concept of green burial. Mark Richardson, right, manager of cemetery services with the City of Niagara Falls where a green burial site exists.

The environmental impact of death

Environmental considerations are one of the big drivers behind the green burial movement. Research suggests a typical burial releases about 833 kg of carbon dioxide. It also puts harmful embalming chemicals into the ground. A cremation releases about 235 kg of carbon dioxide, which is roughly equivalent to a drive from Toronto to Montreal. About 70 per cent of people choose cremation over burial and