

gram in their home... in healthy living. Sluchinski is a member of Royal Canadian Army Cadet Corps 2803 in Fort McMurray.

folio of oil assets, with all four types producing at or near 100,000 barrels per day and con-

MUNICIPALITY: Fort McMurray running out of gravesite space

Cemeteries full, new site needed within four years

SHIRLEY LIN
Today staff

The municipality is on a time crunch to build a new cemetery for nearly a quarter of residents choosing to retire and be buried here, after the city found that local graveyards were quickly filling up.

There are only two cemeteries in Fort McMurray — the one downtown on Biggs Avenue is already at capacity, and the other in Abasand has about four years worth of space left. The new gravesite will need to be at a size that will operate for the next 30 years.

Cole Hendrigan, project manager at Parks, Recreation and Culture, said it will take about four years to buy and build a new cemetery, just as the Abasand Cemetery fills up. "We're on a short timeline."

In June, the team started the initial planning process, and conducted a random survey of about 300 residents 40 and above to see how many plan to retire here or use the local graveyards.

Results show that 20% of residents expect to retire in the area, a number that Hendrigan says was surprising. "I think most of us assumed that most people would retire somewhere else."

The same percentage of people expect that they or a family member will be buried in the region. But that number is even higher for long-time residents

(30%) and for those planning to retire in the area (40%).

The sample survey, conducted by Mustel Group, was commissioned by Lees + Associates, a landscape architecture firm in charge of this project's planning and design.

"We needed to find out what people's intentions were because in Fort McMurray, people come here for a little while, but then they retire somewhere else," Hendrigan said.

A majority of those surveyed were men over 40, most of whom had children or a spouse, and were likely to have family in the area. They have lived in the area for an average of 19 years, and of those, one in five expect to retire here. More than half of those surveyed were aware of their local cemetery, the Abasand graveyard being most well-known, followed by the downtown site.

Those who have a preference of memorial chose to be cremated (58%) believing that choice was more environmentally friendly, less expensive and that the remains are portable.

Those who chose not to be buried in the region said they had either family buried elsewhere or that they plan on leaving town. When asked what factors would change that decision, some said that having local cremation services, improved access during wintertime, lower cost, and a more attractive cemetery would help. But still, almost 75% still said these factors



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This downtown cemetery on Biggs Avenue, behind Superstore, is at full capacity.

wouldn't change their minds.

For lead landscape architect, Erik Lees, he was surprised that that many people were intrigued by the idea of a green burial. But that 20% of people who want to retire here, Lees said it will be an interesting challenge for community planners.

"Typically we look at the population spread. With so few people intending to retire there, that just kind of cuts the community maturity level off prematurely," he said. Lees added that they will look at addressing that issue, so instead of burials, would people consider memorialization

instead.

The team is currently looking for a new site, and Lees said that they anticipate one to be build within a year.

Back in January, municipal council approved a new strategy to deal with the cemetery issue. Councillors unanimously voted for a set of guiding principles and practices for new gravesites which will be routinely checked. The main guideline stated that cemeteries should operate as a service to residents, not as a business.

Now, the project team will make recommendations to

senior administration about land that fits the criteria for a gravesite, after which the city has to ask the province to purchase land.

Hendrigan said they have budgeted for more than \$3 million, but the actual cost will be a lot less.

"That's way more than we're expecting to spend, we're not expecting to spend that much," he said.

Initially, seven areas of land were identified as potential sites: Parsons Creek, west of Timberlea Field, north of Conn Creek, Abrams Land, west of Wood Buffalo subdivision, Sapræe Creek Estates, and south of Highway 69.

The criteria for ideal land included approximately four hectares of land, on a currently zoned area or capable of being zoned, in open space, easily accessible by road or walking paths, not impacted by noise from the airport or heavy industry, and incorporating an existing natural area.

But since then, the city has been eyeing other sites that are better suited.

"They were found to be too difficult to build on, there wasn't going to be good short-term access," Hendrigan said of the earlier sites. Although he won't reveal what the new potential sites are, Hendrigan said the information will soon be made public.

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