

Consultant also recommends cemetery expansion Higher burial fees recommended

By Phil Melnychuk - Maple Ridge News - March 01, 2008

The more people keep moving to Maple Ridge, the more they'll keep dying here, and unless the district raises its fees, upgrades its main cemetery and finds more land for graveyards, there'll be no place to bury them and no money to buy land for more burial sites.

According to the new cemetery master plan, Maple Ridge Cemetery will be full up in four years.

Maple Ridge Cemetery is the main burial place in the district. Whonnock cemetery is the district's second and smaller cemetery, which the report recommends should be renamed Lee Cemetery after a pioneer family.

There are enough plots in Maple Ridge Cemetery to provide burial for the next six years but because of drainage issues, not all plots are available.

To meet that need, a revamping of the cemetery – and an expansion of the grounds northward so they adjoin Dewdney Trunk Road at 214th Street – and buying more land, are among the recommendations in the master plan.

“We will need cemetery lands over and above those just north of the existing cemetery lands,” report author Eric Lees told council.

According to the report, to ensure enough space as the baby boom generation dies off, two hectares of land will be needed to meet the needs of the dying.

From 2011 to 2015, about 1,000 people will be buried in the district.

That will double by 2031, and within a few years of that, the district will need another two hectares of cemetery land.

Properties for that expansion, however, are available adjacent to the existing burial grounds and would be enough to meet the needs until 2028. Expansion of the grounds northward would allow the creation of a larger, centralized grounds that eventually would have frontage on Dewdney Trunk Road, increasing the cemetery's marketability.

Coun. Ken Stewart said the district should look at buying land before the land is used for other purposes.

Lees said most municipalities recover operating costs from burial fees. But the report notes that sales of plots in Maple Ridge subsidize the cost of operating the grounds by about \$60,000 a year.

Mayor Gordy Robson said the district will have to do something or it will have no land and no money to buy it with.

The cost of dying is also to rise, if the report's ideas are adopted. Burial plots in Maple Ridge are cheaper, by about \$1,000, than the provincial average, it notes. For example, an adult burial plot in Maple Ridge costs \$885 while in New Westminster, it's \$2,912.

“There is clearly room to adjust those rates upwards and still maintain the desired goal of affordability for Maple Ridge residents,” it says.

Based on feedback received at public consultation, cemetery grounds could be used for dog walking (leashed only) tai chi classes, meditation or just outdoor relaxation.

The report notes one way of getting more out of a plot of land is by digging graves deeper to allow double burials, doing the same for cremation remains and creating a cremation gardens, the report suggests. A customer service centre also is proposed to allow better help to visitors while a children's play area in a park-like setting would provide a more enjoyable experience.

Over and above the expansion of the present cemetery, the report suggests the district buy land in the eastern part of the municipality and defray the cost by allowing that land to be used temporarily for farming, conservation or recreational purposes until it's needed for cemetery use.

Other suggestions include improving the roads and installing curbs in Maple Ridge Cemetery and longer hours (beyond the 4 p.m. closing time on weekdays). A high priority recommendation is a computerized record and plot system so staff can use hand-held computers to identify plots.

Coun. Craig Speirs said cemeteries can have a tourist function. People visit from other cities to track family history and said he favours the idea of a cemetery in east Maple Ridge.

"Having that 100-year capacity is important because as long as people live, they die."

Staff will bring back final recommendations in a few weeks.

"Put this issue to rest," Robson said.