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Iqaluit seeks to spare Inuit beneficiaries from cemetery fees

City estimates each new gravesite costs \$2,200

PETER VARGA



Burial at Iqaluit's new cemetery, slated to open in mid-October, will cost \$1,000 to \$2,200 per plot. (PHOTO BY PETER VARGA)

The City of Iqaluit is almost ready to open its new cemetery, but before it does, council will have to clear one last hurdle: to figure out how much to charge for burials and to ensure all residents can afford a burial.

Each grave at the new cemetery in Apex, slated to open in mid-October, costs \$2,200 in construction and operating expenses, the city's engineering department.

Project manager Richard Sparham told city council's finance committee of the whole Aug. 18 that this consists of two costs — a \$1,200 capital cost per grave, and \$1,000 per grave in operation and maintenance costs.

Sparham presented a series of options the city may take to reduce burial costs, but said the city must cover the \$2,200 per-plot expense to pay for the project and keep the site maintained.

Sparham presented burial prices charged in municipal cemeteries at other “northern” communities.

He used estimates drawn from a list of eight Canadian municipalities, ranged from \$105 per burial in Churchill, Man., to almost \$2,700 per burial in Prince Albert, Sask.

Inuit councillors balked at the idea that Iqaluit could charge up to \$1,000 per burial, quickly pointing out that most Inuit beneficiaries — who would take up the majority of spaces at the site — could not afford to pay.

Deputy mayor Mary Wilman said burial prices used in towns and cities throughout western Canada and Ontario are not in line with Iqaluit's realities.

Most residents of municipalities in the provinces are “income-providers” and “income-earners,” she said, “whereas that's not the case here.”

“I'm wondering how one would pay for a burial, when they don't have an income,” she asked.

Coun. Noah Papatsie agreed.

“There's a lot of people up here in Iqaluit and elsewhere — 25 communities [of Nunavut] where people don't have any job, and they're only on social income and what not,” he said.

Papatsie added that he understands the costs of burial, but said the costs must be offset somehow.

“Everybody has to help, one way or another,” he said.

“A \$1,000 plot is not for a person who makes the same income as us,” said Coun. Simon Nattaq as he referred back to Sparham's cost comparisons.

“For our loved ones, we have to think about the cost we're going to make them pay when we pass on.”

“We did consider that aspect very seriously,” Sparham replied. “We have always recognized that there are people up here in financial need who cannot afford to pay for burials.”

The cemetery project manager added that there are many possible sources of financial assistance to help Iqalummiut who are in “dire need.”

“We as a municipality can explore those opportunities,” he added.

“In the case of beneficiaries who are also in dire financial need, we were looking at the possibility of opening up some dialog with the QIA or NTI,” he said, pointing to the Qikiqtani Inuit Association and Nunavut Tunngavik Inc.

The city already has arrangements to cover the burials of Inuit beneficiaries at the community's soon-to-be-replaced cemetery in Lower Iqaluit, according to administration.

The two Inuit organizations have nothing to do with it.

“Funeral services are provided by a local undertaker,” city clerk Tracy Cooke told the finance committee when Coun. Terry Dobbin asked about current practice.

The city’s public works department digs the earth and buries the coffins, Cooke said, while the undertaker provides all other basic services related to the funeral, through an contract with the Government of Nunavut, where the government pays for the cost of the coffin, the cross, and whatever fee the undertaker charges for the service, Cooke said.

If residents want any more than what the government provides, “they will be responsible for paying that cost,” she said.

“The city has nothing to do with burials, except digging the holes and filling it once the service is complete,” as well as providing access to the cemetery, Cooke said.

City administration did not say whether they could continue the same arrangement at the new \$1.1 million cemetery.

Sparham said the city could cover all burials through municipal tax revenues. But putting all taxpayers on the hook for all Iqaluit burials and funeral arrangements isn’t realistic, he said.

“Those who do have jobs up here who can afford to pay, should pay,” he said.

Otherwise, “there’s always a way to recognize those who can’t pay and find a way to put together the right funding stream to make that available.”

“It’s just the business of doing city business,” he said.

Sparham agreed to draft some options on payment and funding to cover burial expenses at the cemetery, which he will present to council before the cemetery’s “celebratory opening” in mid-October, he said.

The project manager also reminded the finance committee about an added feature to the cemetery.

Council had considered moving a huge stone cross from a failed cemetery site on the Road to Nowhere, which folded due to problems with the terrain.

Kudlik Construction, which is building the new cemetery, quoted a cost of \$25,000 to move the massive cross.

Councillors took note of the cost, and put off their decision on the matter.

