

**Developing a Natural Burial Ground in Ontario
Where to Start**

Great! You're interested in creating a natural burial ground (NBG). You're timing couldn't be better; there's more and more interest in this eco-friendly option for taking care of our body after death. It's not going to be easy, or fast, but it's a project that many people in your community will welcome. After all, for those of us who are environmentally conscientious, the only way to gently leave is natural burial, and in Ontario there are only a scattering of hybrid green burials.

This document provides an overview of the process of creating a natural burial ground. Every situation is different, but these are the key steps. It's a highly regulated sector; but that's not bad. It's comforting to know that there are associations ensuring our deceased are forever treated with care. The two governing bodies that you will be approaching are your municipality and the Bereavement Association of Ontario (BAO).

Municipal Approval

The good news is that municipalities are looking for ways to protect natural habitat, and if it can be done in a financially sustainable way, all the better. The municipalities also want to answer to the needs of their constituents and there is a growing demand for green burial. Here are a couple things to note:

- Cemetery land is protected against development in perpetuity, so municipal planners want to make sure a cemetery fits with their overall zoning plan.
- If a cemetery is abandoned, by law the municipality must assume responsibility for its maintenance. Municipalities factor this into cemetery approvals. (The Natural Burial Association is working with the BAO to see if grave repurposing is or can be legalized. This will make a cemetery applications more palatable for the municipality because the cemetery will always be financially sustainable).

The zoning designation of a cemetery differs for each municipality. Most frequently cemeteries are zoned as open space/industrial. If you have land that's zoned appropriately that's a good start when you apply to your municipality. Again each municipality is different, however the following are some elements the municipality will be interested in:

- An environmental assessment (a hydrogeological study may be required). A Medical Officer must give sign off. They make sure the land doesn't have a high water table. Most soil types are adaptable for natural burial; loam, clay, gravel.
- A landscape plan which includes a layout of the plots
- How will this benefit the community and the environment
- Public amenities (washrooms, accessibility, road access, parking, etc). These elements are with a view to conventional cemeteries. A natural cemetery may not have washrooms, parking, etc., however it will require road access.

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Municipal Approval (cont'd)

The best bet is to approach your town or city councillor, or go directly to the planning department. Gain an understanding of how your land fits into the municipal plan, and what about your proposal for an NBG appeals and concerns them.

Timing matters. By law, municipalities in Ontario must have a 5 year official plan review, and at this time they must consult with the public. Make natural burial a part of the initial discussion and public consultation. Gather champions to go to the public forums, and make sure natural burial is a topic on the survey if your municipality issues a survey. Find at least one councillor who understands what natural burial is, and can answer questions and present your interests at town council meetings.

Provincial Cemetery License

[The Bereavement Authority of Ontario](#) is the governing body responsible for reviewing and enforcing [the Funeral, Burial and Cremations Act](#). They have the consumers' interests in mind. In particular the BAO wants to make sure that the graves are maintained in a way that dignifies the deceased and meets the cemetery's bylaws (each cemetery has its own bylaws). The BAO will regularly monitor your books and your burial grounds. In order to gain approval as a cemetery (and you can't legally operate without a license) you must apply to the BAO. Some of what's required include: plot map, cemetery bylaws, maintenance, pricing, and more.

Here are links to the BAO applications. Two forms are required: Application for cemetery operator's license and Application for Consent to Establish, Alter or Increase the Capacity of a Cemetery. <https://thebao.ca/for-professionals/cemeteries-crematoriums/forms/>

To become a licensed cemetery, one requirement is a Maintenance Fund. The cemetery holds this fund in trust. The sum of this fund is set by the BAO and depends on the size of the cemetery and other factors. The maximum fund requirement is \$100,000, although we are hopeful natural burials will be less, because they require less maintenance. The cemetery operates off the interest from the fund, and 60% of each plot sale. 40% of the sale of each plot (known as the maintenance fee) must by law be deposited into the fund.

Your Vision

Natural burial grounds offer a chance for someone to leave this earth in a way that is natural and nourishes the soil. That's what goes on beneath the ground. Above ground there's so much opportunity to support the eco-system. Perhaps you partner with a local land trust or an arborist. What about an artist to create a communal marker and other enhancements? Bee hives, butterfly pollinators are also prevalent in green burial grounds. What about bird feeders? Create a plan to

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restore, maintain and preserve the natural habitat. One of the reasons people like natural burial is because they like the idea that their very presence helps to preserve the land in its natural habitat forever. How would you like to structure your cemetery; non-profit, co-op? Can you partner with a conventional cemetery that's already set up in your community?

How the Natural Burial Association Can Help

We are a volunteer run organization whose mandate is to help facilitate the creation of green burials in Ontario. There's so much learning necessary to get a natural burial ground up and running, our goal is to arm individuals and local communities with information so everyone has some tools to begin the task. There's still going to be lots of work, and each situation is different but we are here to help share learning.

Here's how we can help you:

- The more awareness and interest in natural burial, the easier your task will be. To encourage this, please spread the word about the [Natural Burial Association](#) and encourage people to visit our website. There are still lots of people who don't know about this option and the idea of a final resting place in nature. Our website will inspire them, and that in turn can help you build support in your community.
- We are collecting not just names but postal codes of everyone interested in natural burial (via our [e-news sign-up](#)). Your municipal application may involve public input (eg, town halls). The Natural Burial Association will help to rally your supporters, and help you prepare for public discussions.
- The Natural Burial Association also hopes to promote legislative change that will make NBG's easier to create. The current laws make no distinction between natural burial (traditional) and conventional burial (grave markers, mowed lawn, etc). We'd like to create a distinction between traditional and conventional burial in order that the initial fund requirement can be lower. After all, natural burials are less costly to maintain than conventional burials.
- Working with the BAO, we are pursuing the concept of re-use of plots, also called 'repurposing'. This allows that the plot can, over a certain period of time, be used for another body. It's already practiced in Quebec and many other places worldwide. With repurposing, the cemetery can always be financially sustainable - which in turn will be attractive to municipalities.
- Keep in touch with us and let us know your goals. We might be able to put you in touch with people in the sector who can help you jump the hurdles that may come your way.

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Accreditation of Green Burial Grounds

The [Green Burial Society of Canada](#) is a national organization, headquartered in Vancouver. It provides accreditation to green burials according to various criteria. Also a volunteer run organization, their members can help you explore the various factors that are considered when creating a green burial.

We hope this document is of help, and we wish you every success. Please stay in touch!

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