



Natural Burial Sanctuary Coming To TBM

In 2021 Council unanimously approved the Climate Action Now Network's (CANN) deputation to consider including a natural burial sanctuary in the Thornbury-Clarksburg Union Cemetery. Mayor Alar Soever stated: "I'm very happy to support this. Certainly natural burial is more common in Europe than it is here. But I think it's a good way to give back to the environment."

Natural Burial grounds offer a sanctuary for both the dead and the living. Below ground, the unembalmed body, placed in a biodegradable casket or shroud, is buried gently without a vault. So we nourish the earth. Above ground, the land is restored to its natural habitat, and our presence in the ground ensures the land is protected.

Over the past year, CANN's Natural Burial Team, Diana Dolmer and Rosemary Gosselin, have been working closely with Ryan Gibbons, TBM's Director of Community Services. How are we progressing? Here Rosemary interviews Ryan to update the community.

Q. When CANN approached the Town, Shawn (Everitt, CAO) told us the timing was good, as the cemetery is due this year for an overall review. How will the work on a Natural Burial site proceed? Can you give us a timeline?

A. We expect the Request For Proposal (RFP) from consultants to close by mid-June; 6-8 weeks for them to complete their work brings us to mid-August. By early September Staff will report to Council with recommendations. Then by-laws and policies need to be reviewed by the Bereavement Association of Ontario (BAO), say by early October. So we're looking at the Fall for a decision.

Q. So you don't just wave a wand and behold, a beautiful meadow full of butterflies! Early on you suggested the most likely location would be a 3-5 acre site on the far east side of our cemetery lands?

A. We'll bring our ideas to the consultants and they'll let us know what's feasible.

Q. When CANN approached the Town, Shawn (Everitt, CAO) said the timing was good, as the cemetery is due this year for an overall review. Since you took over management in 2011, how has the cemetery evolved?

A. Back then, we had 70% caskets and 30% cremation interments. In 10 years there's been a complete reversal. As you've said, people are concerned about land use and cremation is a more efficient use of land.

Q. There's an influx of younger people moving up here, and I suspect, since the carbon footprint of Natural Burial is minimal, they'll want that option.

A. I expect our consultants will verify that trend.

Q. Hopefully the by-laws for our site will be generous, and allow for cremated remains in biodegradable urns?

A. We try to be as accommodating as possible. One of the first things we did in 2011 was permit winter burials.

Q. What kind of a spanner has COVID thrown into the works?

A. To prepare for numerous deaths in a worst-case scenario, we amended our by-law to allow interment 365 days a year. As it turns out, interment numbers have been consistent throughout the pandemic.

Q. Burials in Ontario are carefully proscribed, and as you've told us, shepherding a Natural Burial site into being is not a walk in the park.

A. You're right. As well as considering our by-laws and reviews by supervisory bodies like the BAO, we need to think about landscaping, memorialization options, care and maintenance, communication with neighbours and residents, and more. As we're talking with consultants over the summer, we look forward to CANN being part of that process.

Q. We're excited about that! I know Diana shared some photographs she and Jim (Dolmer) took on their road trip to other established sites in Ontario. Such lovely options...from meadows to woodlands, pathways, arbours, places to gather and rest, markers of local stone... real community sanctuaries. We're looking forward to our walkabout in May to do some visioning with you. CANN has a list of potential customers, but it's difficult for people to commit before visualizing the space. Something of a chicken and egg dilemma.

A. With the consultants we're hiring, we'll be able to show options and provide ample opportunity for public consultation too.

Q. As we've been talking, Ryan, I sense you have a real affinity for your work. Would you share some thoughts on that?

A. First, I had great mentors, Al and Earl Gibson, who supervised our cemetery for 30 years. And I grew up around here. My first job was taking money for public skating at the arena. I was 13.

Q. What do you find most satisfying about your role?

A. The ability to help friends and family at a very difficult time, and to try and make it easy where I can.

Q. And what is most challenging?

A. The same thing! (with a grin). Being part of the community, finding a balance between friends and family working through difficult situations when it's unexpected. Like at the gravesite.

Q. You have the right personality for this. It's such a tender time. You need someone who's compassionate as well as practical.

A. Planning ahead makes things a lot easier for families as they go through the process of death. The more death can be discussed openly, the better.

At time of writing, acreage at the eastern section of the cemetery beyond the stand of trees is being considered for Natural Burial Sanctuary, with plans for interments in the Fall of 2022.

For further information: CANNTBM@gmail.com

www.naturalburialassociation.ca

libraryprograms@thebluemountains.ca

519-599-3681 x145 (handouts)