

New Lawrence 'green burial' site to be available to all

By Steve Nicely

A discussion of green burials on a National Public Radio show earlier this year caught the ear of Dennis "Boog" Highberger, of Lawrence, Kan. The 49-year-old Lawrence city commissioner counts himself among many in the college town who try to harmonize their lives with the environment.

"And a lot of us would like to minimize our impact on the planet on our way out," Highberger said, standing on the edge of a mature forest along the north section of Oak Hill Cemetery. In January 2009, when \$600 lots within the forest will go on sale, Lawrence appears poised to become the first city in the United States to operate a "green," or "natural," cemetery with lot sales not restricted to city residents. Highberger said he will be among the first to buy a lot.

"Shall I lie down and cross my arms for the picture?" he joked.

Highberger's green cemetery proposal received the unanimous approval of the city commission and the cooperation of two of the city's three funeral directors.

Going natural means that the trees will remain, although underbrush will be cleared. Pathways will lead to 250 grave sites as a start, and there is room for many more. Bodies in the natural cemetery section may not be embalmed. No metal or plastic caskets will be allowed. Also banned are the

concrete or steel grave liners or vaults that most cemeteries require.

Bodies may be buried in plain wood containers or other biodegradable materials. The minimum permitted is a cardboard box reinforced on the bottom with boards. When placed in the ground at a minimum depth of five feet, the box lid may be removed before the grave is filled to bring a shrouded body into more immediate contact with the earth. As the body decomposes, it will rejoin the natural cycle, living again in trees and other surface vegetation.

Leaders of the Funeral Consumers Alliance of Greater Kansas City, although cheered by the arrival of a green cemetery in the area, urged Lawrence officials to allow three-foot-deep burials and simple shroud burials without a box because decomposition is enhanced by oxygen, fungi, and microbes found closer to the surface. But Lawrence set the deeper limit to ensure that animals will not disturb the unprotected bodies.

That has not been a problem in natural cemeteries in the United States and the United Kingdom, said Joe Sehee, of Santa Fe, N.M., executive director of the Green Burial Council, a group of experts who set standards and certify green cemeteries. But the council leaves decisions about depth up to cemetery officials, based on local soil conditions.



Dennis "Boog" Highberger, Lawrence city commissioner, in the city's newly designated green burial area at Oak Hill Cemetery. The site will be available to people regardless of their city of residence.

The sometimes-alarming ability of untreated bodies to emit sounds or leak fluids when moved were other practical matters that Lawrence funeral directors raised. Their concerns resulted in the minimum requirement of a reinforced cardboard box to stabilize bodies. Cynthia Boecker, assistant city administrator, said the city wanted to begin cautiously and may modify its guidelines as it gathers experience.

Natural burials pose no particular challenges for funeral directors who have refrigeration facilities, which are needed to preserve the body when burial is postponed for a few days.

"I see no reason why any funeral home would have a problem [with green

burial]," said Mark Smith, general manager of Shawnee's Amos Funeral Home. "No body preparation and burial in a shroud—we've done that for people of the Islamic faith for years."

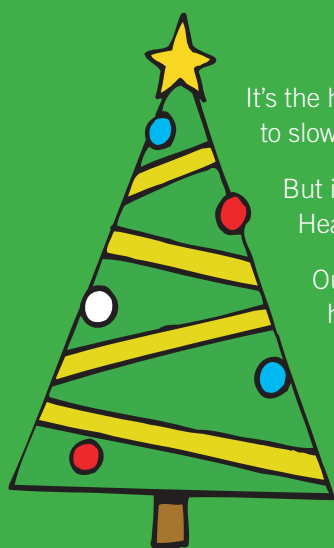
Green burials are less costly for families and less profitable for funeral directors. The average price for embalming in the Kansas City area was \$683 in the 2007 price survey conducted by the Funeral Consumers Alliance. The survey showed that the average prices for the lowest-cost caskets and grave liners offered by funeral homes were \$709 and \$609 respectively. (Complete survey results are in the agency's summer newsletter, posted at www.funerals.org/affiliates/kansascity.)

Missouri's first natural cemetery, Green Acres, in Columbia, opened last spring. Bill Goddard, its operator, recently sold its first two lots to a Kansas City couple. He said two types of people are potential buyers: those who want to reduce their carbon footprint and those interested in saving money.

For information about the Oak Hill green cemetery, call Lawrence Cemeteries at 785-832-7955. The cemetery address is 1605 Oak Hill Ave. From Johnson County, take K-10 highway west into Lawrence to the second stop light; turn right on Haskell Avenue, then right on 15th Street, left on Elmwood Street, and right on Oak Hill Avenue into the cemetery.

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