

Adding headstones to Trumbull cemetery stirs debate

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News



Flags mark the grave markers of veterans at Gate of Heaven Cemetery on May 22, 2018.
File photo

TRUMBULL — Headstones in a cemetery may not seem like a controversial proposal, but the public will get its chance to speak out on the matter at the Planning & Zoning Commission's next meeting.

The commission tabled last month a request from the Diocese of Bridgeport to allow headstones at Gate of Heaven Cemetery after about 45 minutes of discussion. Since its founding in 1959, Gate of Heaven has only had flat markers to adhere to the original zoning approval.

"It's a very personal matter, and there is a lot of people that don't want to go in a mausoleum, don't want to be cremated, and would like to have a headstone," said attorney Raymond Rizio, representing the diocese. "But if you want to be buried in a Catholic cemetery, and you want to be in Trumbull, you can't have a headstone."



Flags mark the grave markers of veterans at Gate of Heaven Cemetery on May 22, 2018.
File photo

No town ordinance prohibits upright headstones, but the stipulation was part of Gate of Heaven's original zoning approval. Every other cemetery in town, and all of those operated by the diocese allows headstones, he said.

Commissioners, though, questioned the need to make a change when Gate of Heaven has been operating under the restriction for decades.

"It's almost like you're claiming a hardship," David Preusch said. "Have you found that not having stones decreases demand? Are people saying, 'I want a stone, so I'm going to go somewhere else?'"

Rizio confirmed that was in fact the case.

"People are very particular. I do trusts and estates, and people put what they want in their will or they buy cemetery plots," he said. "Many people, they want a headstone, a place where they can honor their parent or loved one, and they don't have that option. We lost a number of people that would like to be buried in Gate of Heaven, but because they wanted a headstone, they went to other cemeteries."

Chairman Fred Garrity said cemeteries face the same challenges of other businesses.

“It is unfortunately the nature of this great American free market system,” Garrity said. “Good, bad or indifferent, they are in competition with other cemeteries.”

Other commission members cited dozens of letters from neighbors opposing the change, and cited Gate of Heaven’s aesthetics, which commission member Anthony Chory described as a “prairie-like” setting.

“It has formed its own unique character as being like an open prairie,” he said. “There’s an aesthetic that makes it unique. To just randomly start changing the whole prairie-like view, to me, would be hurtful to somebody that’s not used to that.”

Chory pointed out that families who have buried loved ones at Gate of Heaven did so with the understanding that the cemetery only allows flat grave markers.

“I imagine when they went in it was farmland and prairie and they wanted to maintain that view,” he said.

Commission member Tony D’Aquila agreed, saying, “we have people there, and there could be the expectation that there would be no headstones because they wanted to be in a park-like environment.”

Rizio replied that the diocese was willing to make some accommodations, such as leaving the existing sections of the cemetery as they are, and allowing headstones only in newly opened areas.

“We have so much acreage, we could have an area designated specifically for headstones,” he said. “We can modify it for people that thought they were going into a headstone-less cemetery.”

Rizio also pointed out that the cemetery has a 25-foot high mausoleum, but the building’s design and the cemetery’s layout made the building essentially invisible from Daniels Farm Road and the surrounding homes.

“Much has happened over the years,” he said. “The bishop’s residence was built, and then expanded. The mausoleum was constructed. The burial area is 15 to 20 feet below the grade from Daniels Farm Road. The typical headstone has a 12-inch base and a 36-inch stone above it. The mausoleum is 25 feet high and you can barely only see the roof from Daniels Farm Road.”

Garrity suggested resuming the meeting Jan. 20 to give the public a chance to speak and Rizio time to prepare some options for where the headstones would be allowed, and to present landscaping designs to preserve the scenic aspects of the cemetery and neighborhood.

“The change that’s being made is the ability for families to be able to choose the lot and type of recognition for all of eternity after they pass away,” he said.

Rizio agreed to come back with more specific plans, and predicted most people in town would barely notice the change.

“Everyone knows it’s Gate of Heaven Cemetery. We want to give people who would like to be buried here an option that they have everywhere else in town and everywhere else in the area,” he said. “We’re not looking to upset the apple cart. We don’t want anyone to see these stones except the people who go there. We don’t envision as an impact issue at all.”