

Maynooth residents heartbroken by the state of Grace Cemetery



By Chris Houston

On Sunday, a group of Maynooth residents gathered at Grace Cemetery to share their frustrations. The cemetery is one of six managed by the Municipality of Hastings Highlands, which took over responsibility from the United Church.

Sandra Stamplecoski's brother and father are buried in plots on the western edge of the cemetery on Williams Lake Road. Stamplecoski was visibly upset as she spoke, "I am insulted, I am hurt, I am devastated, my heart is broken. Look at how they are treating my father," she told the Bancroft Times as she pointed to her father's headstone. William "Keith" Slater, a veteran of the Korean War, died just before Christmas in 2014. Weeds partly obscure Slater's headstone, a problem visible around much of the northern and western fence lines of the cemetery. "This has been going on for three years and I'm getting more and more angry," Stamplecoski told The Times, describing the maintenance of her family's plots as long neglected.

Manda Slater, granddaughter of William Slater, described the situation as "disrespectful" and expressed hope that maintenance will resume soon before more graves are affected.

Mabel Stamplecoski's grandson was buried in the graveyard twenty years ago. Mabel is tearful as she laments the condition of the plots, "I'm disgusted with the whole thing." She was joined by her husband Wayne; the couple are Sandra's parents-in-law and have several relatives and friends buried in Grace Cemetery. Mabel used her hands to brush away dirt and leaves to reveal the headstone of Mary and Earnest Slater. Wayne reflected on the maintenance inconsistencies: "The centre is great, but they have to clean up to the fence line."

In response to these concerns, the Municipality of Hastings Highlands provided a detailed statement. Municipal Clerk Suzanne Huschilt outlined the broader challenges faced by municipalities across Ontario, including an increase in abandoned cemeteries being transferred to municipal care as cemetery boards and churches dissolve. "Hastings Highlands is not allowed to use the care and maintenance funds for these cemeteries, so the majority of the cost for running and maintaining them is at the expense of the taxpayer." For years, the Municipality of Hastings Highlands has been one of many calling on the Province of Ontario to provide financial and legislative relief to municipalities caring for abandoned cemeteries. Huschilt told the Bancroft Times that while the Ontario Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery is aware of the challenges faced by municipalities and recognizes the requests for support, "it is not considering providing municipalities with financial assistance for assuming responsibility for abandoned cemeteries."

Speaking of Grace Cemetery, Huschilt reported, "There is no designated cemetery staff for tree and branch trimming along the fence lines at any of the cemeteries. Work has been done as needed and as able using any available labour. Grass cutting is conducted as needed by a contractor. Tree removal has become necessary, and in October 2022 the municipality had a tree company remove a tree that was on the property line and overlooking the Stamplecoski plots, with plans to remove more, as budget allows. In 2023, the top end of the cemetery had some brushing done along the fence line with plans to continue on the other side this year. The municipality has some money budgeted for cemetery maintenance projects for 2024, being \$6,500. The municipality will be getting a quotation next week for the removal of two more trees and brushing next to the fence line where the Stamplecoski plots are. This was planned maintenance for this summer, as approved by Council in the 2024 budget."

Sandra Stamplecoski points out that the effort needed to resolve the issue is modest and has been requested for years. She urged people to "Remember that these people who have already gone deserve to not be forgotten. They need to be respected." She calls for action and is not convinced by the explanations from the Municipality. She is tired of repeated promises to act, but also optimistic that this might finally be resolved, acknowledging that in recent days a rotten tree was removed from near her father's grave.

Wayne Stamplecoski notes that regular maintenance would have prevented the encroachment of thicker brush and trees and has a message for the municipality: "Get at it and clean it up. Have it done."