

**DRAFT MINUTES
TOWN OF SWANTON
CEMETERY COMMISSION MEETING
Town Office Building
1 Academy Street, Swanton, VT 05488
*Monday, April 11, 2022 @ 7:00 p.m.***

Present: Gary Centabar, Cemetery Commission Chair; Brian Savage, Andrew Centabar, Cody Hemenway, Nicholas Brosseau, Cemetery Commission Members; Joseph Cava, Administrative Assistant; James Guilmette, Selectboard Chair; Mark Rocheleau, Selectboard Vice Chair; Barbara Hubis; Kyanna King; Lynn Savage; Dean Ryan; John Lavoie; Debbie Lavoie; James McDonald; Dillon Dupont; Macy Dupont; Colleen Boardman; Namoth Boardman; Alexis Dubois; Saundra Dubois; Lisa Meunier; Crystal Woods; Shelly Campbell; Sandra Larivee; Bruce Spaulding; Linda Daneau

*All motions carried unanimously unless stated otherwise.

- A. Call to Order – Mr. Savage called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.
- B. Pledge of Allegiance – Mr. Savage led those present in the Pledge of Allegiance.
- C. Review of Policies, Rules, and Regulations of the Commission’s cemeteries

Mr. Savage opened by reviewing the policies, rules, and regulations of the Cemetery Commission. At no point did Mr. Savage mention anything in the policy/regulation about the maintenance and restrictions of flowers, shrubbery, or trees.

- D. Public Comment

Ms. Campbell noticed shrubs being taken down and asked why this was and why it wasn’t publicly announced. Mr. Centabar responded by reviewing the rules of the Cemetery Commission. Ms. Woods rebuked Mr. Centabar saying that every year she annually maintains the graves of her relatives and was shocked that her relatives’ shrubs were removed. Ms. Daneau added that she had slim and slender shrubs that were removed without provocation.

Ms. Boardman asked why living relatives weren’t notified before removing property from their loved one’s graves? Ms. Boardman continued stating that Riverside Cemetery is not Arlington National Cemetery and the way that Riverside has been defiled is not the type of behavior that is expected of Swanton.

Ms. DuPont asked the what the height/size restrictions are beyond small that is defined by the Cemetery Commission? Mr. Centabar responded that the Cemetery Commission don’t specifically have any height requirements set in place yet.

Ms. Meunier stated that some of these removals were warranted because some graves were out of control, but in defense of the DuBois family which holds a large plot in Riverside, what harm were the shrubs doing? Ms. Corrigan raised an issue with the amount of information highlighted in the Town Annual report. There was no mention of smaller shrubs. Ms. Lavoie asked the Cemetery Commission what gave them the right to cut down trees and shrubs without a rule in place to manage the size and diameter of them?

Mr. Centabar responded to concerns stating that this is a maintenance issue because it makes it difficult to mow and trim around the stones without causing damage. He brought up contact with other cemetery commissions who also did similar removals in cemeteries around Northern Vermont. There was a meeting of the Cemetery Commission where only three of the five board members were present to vote to do this. This was without the knowledge of the remaining two board members.

In response, Mr. Lavoie asked whether this was a Cemetery Commission decision or an individual decision? The answer, Mr. Lavoie said, is no. Whatever rules or regulations that are in place only covers larger trees. Mr. Hemenway chimed in saying as a board member he did not agree to any of this. He expanded saying Mr. Centabar approached him about removing larger trees. Nothing was said about the smaller shrubs. Mr. Savage added that many of these trees will be recorded moving forward since the rules have only been posted on the cemetery grounds within the last 4-5 years.

Mr. Lavoie asked why is there an issue with wreaths on gravestones when this has been the practice for hundreds of years? He expanded saying there is a concern over special treatment in the cemetery because some graves have been defiled while others were left untouched. Mr. Centabar responded that up until now the rules of the Cemetery Commission have not been enforced. In response to enforcement Ms. Meunier asked, who gives you this power to treat people differently, referencing the area in the back left corner of Riverside? Mr. Centabar referenced the area Ms. Meunier spoke about as Pauper's Field where those who could not afford plots were buried.

Mr. Ryan spoke about a cedar tree that stood over his brother's gravestone. The tree was grown from seed and chopping down his tree was like taking everything away from his wife and two little girls. Following this the board room rose up in an uproar requiring Mr. Savage to reconvene the meeting to order.

Mr. Savage then led in a discussion of community cemeteries being common land. Ms. Daneau asked what is defined as common land? What are the rights associated with buying a plot for burial in the cemetery? Mr. Savage responded that the cemetery was reserved for the poor and buying a plot was reserved for burial rights only. Ms. Boardman asked how to prevent this from happening again? Mr. Savage responded that there will be another meeting like this 60-90 days from now to adopt new rules and regulations.

Mr. Dupont asked if there was any record of the trees that were removed? Mr. Centabar held up a reference picture of the plot with lots of shrubs and trees that were removed. The

reasoning was given that this plot contained the tallest shrubs before the room fell apart in chaos. Mr. Dupont responded to Mr. Centabar feeling like families were singled out.

Mr. Rocheleau asked what will happen to the remaining shrubs and trees? Do you, referencing Mr. Centabar, feel you did the right thing? Mr. Centabar responded, yes, I do. Mr. Centabar, then flipped the question to Mr. Rocheleau on how he would feel if one of these trees fell on his family's stones, damaging it? Would it make you feel differently about the removal of trees and shrubs? In response to this, Mr. Rocheleau requested Mr. Centabar's immediate withdrawal of his position as head of the Cemetery Commission. Mr. Centabar responded that he has another two-year term with his current position and does not plan on stepping down. Mr. Guilmette responded to Mr. Centabar saying that his actions were completely out of line and agreed with Mr. Rocheleau saying he needs to resign.

Ms. Daneau asked if people are handed the regulations when they buy a plot at Riverside? Mr. Centabar responded that they do now. Mr. Larivee asked why surviving family members weren't told about this? Ms. Larivee came back from Florida after finding out that her family's grave was defiled. Mr. Lavoie asked Mr. Centabar how the limb of a cedar tree will break headstones? Mr. Lavoie continued saying we are all family minded individuals, and there is no excuse why people couldn't have been notified. You haven't just broken people's hearts, you've destroyed people's trust.

Ms. Campbell piggybacked on Mr. Lavoie's points saying that you can find out whose stones are whose. If the Cemetery Commission doesn't keep accurate records, then the gravestone manufacturers do. Mr. Ryan asked does this tree look like it's going to break a stone, sending his phone around the room showing people how much more damage was caused by cutting everything down than by leaving it in place?

Mr. Centabar responded saying that he takes full responsibility for this. He added that other cemeteries like in Burlington have done similar things including a similar uproar that occurred in St. Albans. Mr. Hemenway responded to community members saying that people in this community should not feel like their loved ones can't find rest in the afterlife and he acknowledged the hurt that people were feeling.

Ms. Meunier asked if the Cemetery Commission will start taking away trinkets in addition to trees and shrubs? Mr. Centabar responded that the Cemetery Commission has not fine-tuned the language on this yet. Ms. Woods responded to Mr. Centabar saying when you took down my tree you threw the trinkets across the ground like they were nothing. How are you going to rectify this? Mr. Lavoie asked who is going to take care of the damage like stumps left in the ground? Ms. Woods responded pointedly towards Mr. Centabar asking him what he is going to do about it?

Mr. Centabar responded that the Cemetery Commission is going to talk about it and figure out what they're going to do. Ms. Meunier recommended forming a subcommittee to come up with specific guidelines to move forward into the future. Ms. Woods

responded to the Cemetery Commission saying the damage is done and will last years to come. Ms. Campbell asked who would be on this subcommittee other than Mr. Centabar? Mr. Savage took a poll of the board members including Cody Hemenway and Andrew Centabar who volunteered to be part of the subcommittee. Ms. Dupont volunteered to be on this subcommittee to have community input.

Mr. Lavoie asked what happens when someone needs burial in the winter? He cited that people get buried year-round. Mr. Centabar responded that people haven't been buried in Riverside during the winter for the past 30 years because of the damage it causes to the ground to dig it up frozen and seed in the spring. Mr. Lavoie cited how difficult it is for families to get closure when relatives are stored in a vault in Enosburg until Spring.

Mr. Rocheleau asked if the cutting would continue? Going around the table, board members expressed the desire not to continue cutting with the exception of Mr. Savage saying large full growth trees are the exception. Mr. Rocheleau skipped over Mr. Centabar because of his decision to cut the shrubs and trees. Ms. Meunier asked what is going to be done about the trunk stubs sticking out of the ground? Mr. Guilmette stated without pointing fingers that the actions of the Cemetery Commission were in the wrong and recommended bringing in a portable stump grinder to resolve lingering damage.

Ms. Woods added that without the trees in place there is no erosion control to keep the cemetery and loved ones from going into the Missisquoi River. In response to this member of the public called for an arborist to do a survey of the cemetery to understand the blight in existing trees. Mr. Savage has received calls about putting in compost bins to take care of the dead flowers. No artificial flowers have always been the general rule of thumb, but he doesn't know how the old rule originated.

Ms. Meunier added that what makes Riverside special is the community's ability to respect other people's graves and to pick up after themselves. Ms. Woods added that the tree cutters have made more of a mess by taking the trees out than by leaving them. Mr. Savage added that winds knock flags off graves and strewn them about the cemetery. Ms. Woods addressed the Cemetery Commission asking for a time frame for how ornament and other decoration can be removed by owners of deceased loved ones before they get thrown away like garbage. Ms. Campbell added that it could have been handled better than it was.

Mr. Hemenway again acknowledged how this was handled and expressed that the Cemetery Commission wants to do things more professional. Ms. Dupont added that it would have been helpful to be notified. Mr. Lavoie added that premise of this meeting is because no one person took responsibility, and it is past the point of saying anything to rectify what was done. Mr. Savage said the subcommittee is formed and all anyone can do is move forward.

- E. Adjournment – Mr. Hemenway made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 8:15 p.m., seconded by Mr. Centabar. Motion carried.

Respectfully Submitted,

Joseph Cava
Administrative Assistant