

OPINION

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OUR VIEW

Cemeteries need our attention

The latest news about Ocean View Cemetery offers a chance to examine a longer-term issue that the North Coast and all other communities should address.

What should we do about dead bodies?

While it may seem a delicate subject, it is certainly not a frivolous or inappropriate question.

For years, Western nations with shared faith traditions have followed a practice of embalming bodies, placing them in wooden coffins and burying them in the ground. This practice was embraced in this country during the Civil War era.

The solemn ceremonies that accompany burial allow relatives to have a degree of closure, despite their grief. And a tombstone gives families a visual memory — and a place to visit — to help them cope with the loss of their loved ones.

The concept's popularity and practicality was based on the availability of land for graveyards, usually set aside by churches, municipalities or other governments, or on land owned and maintained by benevolent or fraternal organizations.

In recent years, cremation has become a more acceptable and chosen option and is considerably cheaper for surviving families than traditional burial. In fact, Clatsop County residents lead Oregon counties in choosing this method.

This has the advantage of reducing a body to ash, which can be scattered to help the environment or preserved in appropriate ways like on columbaria, which are vertical shelves, in locations that take up considerably less space than graveyards.

Lately, other families have even been looking for more sustainable interments. Washington is the first state to permit composting, which could become a trend. There is also the option of natural burial, in which bodies are buried,



Ocean View Cemetery, owned and managed by Astoria, is in Warrenton.

Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

but allowed to decompose in biodegradable containers or shrouds. However, so far only two Oregon cemeteries have gained credentialing to offer this service.

Not everyone embraces these options, though. And for those who prefer, the opportunity for traditional burial is still available — for now.

But what of the management of graveyards? They need constant upkeep and most if not all are running out of space. And when new developments are planned, it is rare that they include land set aside for new cemeteries.

Ocean View is a super setting in Warrenton. The cemetery was established in 1897 and, taken together, the inscriptions on its stones form a history of the community, as do all such facilities.

Following criticism about

reduced efforts on upkeep, Astoria, which owns the cemetery, contracted with specialists to generate a master plan on how to best enhance and manage the facility.

The upkeep of cemeteries is rarely well funded, and the popularity of cremation is reducing revenue for agencies that maintain them. Groups too often rely on the dedication of one or more people who mow, weed and repair as a “labor of love,” often because they have a specific personal connection to the locale or a loved one buried there. When they become too aged to perform those duties, problems ensue.

The business models for cemeteries must keep up with the times. It's a sometimes forgotten area of society that needs some examination before a lack of space and operating funds becomes a crisis.

One way to enliven cemeteries, as consultants hired by Astoria suggested, is to host more events. This strategy has the two-fold advantage of being inherently pleasurable or locally significant, while drawing an audience to view the location, check on its upkeep and discover its needs.

Hosting the Clatsop County Historical Society's Talking Tombstones living history feature is one such method, but Memorial Day and other observances can help solidify community support while providing an opportunity for patriotic observances.

We eagerly await January, when a draft master plan from the consultants helping Astoria will be presented. It's likely to contain some recommendations that could signal a positive direction for other communities, too.

GUEST COLUMN

Honoring Oregon's veterans

Hailing from each of Oregon's 36 counties, nearly 150,000 Oregonians served in the armed forces during World War II, according to the Oregon Secretary of State's Office.

“They came from the remote ranches of Harney County dozens of miles from any paved road, from the densely packed apartments of central Portland and everywhere in between.”

Earlier this month, Oregonians observed Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day, honoring the men and women who lost their lives in the Japanese attack that brought the U.S. into World War II.

Fewer than 390,000 U.S. veterans of World War II are alive, including 7,314 in Oregon, according to the National World War II Museum. The largest segment of Oregon veterans are those who served during the Vietnam era.

The difference between those eras will be illustrated in the war memorials in Willson Park on the Oregon Capitol grounds.

Mike Abbate is designing the proposed Vietnam War Memorial so it complements but contrasts with the Oregon World War II Memorial, which was dedicated in 2014.

“World War II had widespread public support. Vietnam War did not,” he said. “World War II veterans were welcomed as heroes. Vietnam veterans were ignored, or worse. World War II had clear — very clear — goals and enemies. And our goals and enemies in Vietnam were not so clear.”

The World War II memorial is at Court and Cottage streets NE. The Viet-

nam memorial will be at the other end of the block, State and Cottage, with an area between to honor prisoners of war and those missing in action.

The solid black wall of the World War II memorial reflects the unified public support of the war, Abbate said. The Vietnam memorial will have black columns whose gaps will signify fractured support, and there will be other contrasts.

The proposed memorial will cost about \$2.7 million. Backers hope to get approval from the 2020 Legislature, according to Steve Bates, president of the Vietnam War Memorial Fund. It will be privately funded.

Regardless of when they served, Oregon veterans share many of the same challenges. The Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs heard about some at its quarterly meeting this month in Salem.

I was astounded that in 2019, the federal VA still uses a paper billing system for health care. That explains why hospitals and other providers often first bill Medicare, electronically, even though a veteran might have 100% coverage through the VA.

That is a huge problem for the veteran.

Medicare often require copays. Christine Gittins, of Redmond, a U.S. Army veteran who serves on the department's advisory committee, told me that those copays could run into thousands of dollars for a hospital experience.

Federal regulations bar the VA from covering those copays. It can pay the whole bill. But it cannot pick up the final part of what another federal agency has paid. (If this makes sense to anyone, please explain it to me.)

When the VA denies payment for the



The Oregon World War II Memorial in Salem.

copy, the veteran is stuck either paying the copay or getting the bill redirected in whole to the VA, as I understand it. Gittins suggested veterans call the 1-800 number at the bottom of the VA claim denial for help in figuring out what to do.

Besides the frustration veterans endure, the lengthy process results in their often being sent to collection while their bill goes unpaid. Their credit report suffers until they get it correct.

Darwin Goodspeed, director of the Portland VA Health Care System, said many veterans are good at navigating the system and alerting their providers to always bill the VA. But until the federal rules change, he's stuck.

And committee members noted that VA facilities aren't good at communicating with each other.

My perspective was that Goodspeed didn't appear to be passing the buck. He didn't dodge difficult questions. Committee members seemed relieved that he recognized the VA's backwardness in some areas but also came with news of progress.

Federal legislation that took effect last summer brought common sense to aspects of the VA. For example, VA patients in Bend no longer will have to drive to the Portland VA to get an MRI. The VA is contracting to provide more services locally, including urgent care in Tillamook and cardiology and MRIs in Bend.

And, Goodspeed told me, the VA hopes to fully implement electronic billing by next June.

Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.



DICK HUGHES