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Mono Council making changes to its cemetary

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Mono Council met on November 17 of this year, in what was one of the most contentious and lengthy Council meetings to date.

Councillors discuss a number of planning issues as well as a lengthy in-camera session on related issues and By-law Enforcement.

The meeting opened with a presentation from the Fung Lou Kok Institute of Taoism, regarding their Niagara Escarpment Comission (NEC) Development Permit Review.

This issue has been ongoing since 2015 and concerns the applicant's request to change their Cemetery Site Plan to allow for the site to be converted from plots to columbarium. As well, they want to beautify the site of the Cemetery, which will better conceal it from 5th Sideroad and the homes to the east of the site.

The beautification is to include a new vehicular archway and the planting of numerous trees on the site as well as adding a pedestrian walkway and benches.

Evans Planning Inc, the designated planners, have been working closely with NEC and Town Staff to bring about the development changes.

The currently approved site plan, calls for 1,575 flush mounted cemetery plots in the 2-hectare property.

The eventual, total number of niches, in the columbarium plan will be 15,134.

In a March 2016 Council Recommendation, the total number of niches was to be 1,507.

In the plan seen November 17, the Northeast corner of the cemetery would accommodate 37 columbarium, housing 1,277 niches in place of 363 plots.

The entrance archway would be reduced in size, with no lighting on either the archway or the columbarium and the landscaping to shield the view from the 5th Sideroad would be done.

The plan also showed that there would be no impact on groundwater conditions and monitoring is a part of the Development Permit, regardless.

A traffic study sowed no negative impact on road operations, however, a hidden driveway sign would be installed on 5th Sideroad.

In regards to the need for increased capacity, the current design has had limited success and the application will provide landscape improvements and add phased long term capacity.

Despite this, opposition was seen from several residents and some members of Council.

The primary resident concerns centred around this being a Trojan horse, designed to allow for a massive commercialization of the site, seemingly in opposition to the NC guidelines.

With niches in the GTA selling for upwards of $7,000, this was seen as a money-making incentive to open the cemetery to a larger Taoist community than the local one.

Locally, the community is estimated to be 1,800 people living within an hour's drive of the site. The residents' arguments are that this does not take into consideration the larger general population of Mono, also within an hours drive.

They argued that with the GTA there are approximately 15,000 in the Tao community and that this is who the project is aimed at. The fact that the occupants of a cemetery are all deceased did not seem to enter into anyone's agenda.

Councillor Manktelow was the most adamant of the councillors in his opposition. In his mind, a large cemetery was not appropriate in the, ?rolling hills of Mono, the smaller the better.?

Councillor Nix, who supported the presentation, pointed out that the Town was not the governing body, but we're merely being asked to say yes or no to the NEC concerning the design proposal.

He did however, say that although he has no issues with the proposal, the NEC guidelines stipulate that it is allowable as long as it serves the size of the community. He asked who the community were and where do they come from? He asked if the NEC agreed with the estimated 1,800 person community number. His primary concern was as to whether or not the proposal was in accordance with the NEC. This is of particular interest, as the NEC is the deciding body and their decision overrides any municipal one.

Wayne Haddock, local resident, was of the opinion that Mono had more than enough cemeteries at present and that as only 11 burials had occurred in the past 35 years that the need for expansion was simply not there. He felt the traffic study did not look far enough in the future and cited existing water supply issues on the site already, with water already being trucked in, to support events. He supported maintaining the status quo.

Dr. David Emery, a neighbour across the road from the site, had other opinions. He stressed that this was an exception to an approved NEC use and he felt that it was not in the best interests of the community at large. Dr. Emery stated that he has a problem with nimbyism, defined as, ?the practice of objecting to something that will affect one or take place in one's locality.?

He stated that he has had no previous problems with the Taoists, yet does not agree they should receive special privileges.

He was clear to point out that he is accepting of all cultures and religious beliefs and as a Canadian would not want to see any form of prejudice perceived in his objections. Nevertheless, he purchased his property to enjoy a quiet rural lifestyle and this application will affect his property. His argument is that of the Trojan horse, mentioned earlier and the fact that it does not meet the needs of either the Tao community or the greater Mono one. He feels that the application should be rejected and that the applicant should be allowed to come back when they can demonstrate an actual need.

Councillor Nix reiterated his opinion that the numbers were not relevant, since it was not the Town that was building this, but the Tao Institute. If they overestimated the size it was their problem.

He went on to question the opinion that this was unusual stating that Mono already had numerous similar undertakings, such as the Hockley Valley Resort, the Goodyear Scout Camp, the Buddhist Monastery just north of the Tao Institute and the Nordic Ski Club at Monora Park. He said that all the current discussions had still not changed his mind.

In the end Council drafted a resolution saying they supported the first Phase of the project with a number of changes, including a limit of 365 niches and the landscaping being continued on the east side as well as the South. They also made the total number of plots remain the same as the 1987 permit at 1,575, including the niches and the proposed arch was acceptable. As well, it specified that the NEC confirm that the development was acceptable within their guidelines.