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A Filer man who has been caring for the town's cemetery for decades says he can't do the job by himself anymore

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Tom Lancaster talks Wednesday about the state of the cemetery at the Filer Cemetery.

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FILER — About a mile west of U.S. 93, wooden crosses and gray headstones bring an atmosphere of peace and solemnity in the cold morning air. A large sign welcomes visitors to Filer Cemetery. But down the dirt road leading from the entrance, a portable toilet and pump house looks out of place.

More than 3,000 people have been laid to rest here over the past century. But the rising demand for cremation means the private cemetery doesn't get the funds it used to for maintenance.

If all goes according to plan, Filer residents will decide this November whether they would like to create a cemetery maintenance district.

A three-man board of directors runs the nonprofit overseeing Filer Cemetery. Tom Lancaster is both board secretary and cemetery manager. He was also a member of the original group that opened the cemetery in 1908 — the Filer Independent Order of the Odd Fellows Lodge. The lodge disbanded in the mid-90s.

“We just got old and died — except me,” Lancaster said.

The 80-year-old Filer resident has a personal interest in the fate of the cemetery. It's where many of his family members are buried. But he'd also like to retire. Lancaster is on call at any hour of the day or night.



Crosses stand next to veterans' graves Wednesday at the Filer Cemetery.

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On Friday, he met with the county commission to discuss his plan for a maintenance district.

“Tom saw the writing on the wall that he can’t do it anymore,” Twin Falls County Commissioner Terry Kramer said. “And he needs to get it a stable funding source. The districts are created for the perpetual maintenance of the cemetery.”

The county owns a section of the cemetery for indigent burials, with the first dating back to 1931. Kramer sees a need to protect the area’s history and prevent the cemetery from ever falling into ruin. And the cemetery manager has a list of improvements he’d like to see happen if the cemetery had the money.

“We just have some needs that have been needing addressed since 1908, and it’s probably time we did this,” Lancaster said.

For one, the cemetery’s roads aren’t paved, and they become muddy after a rainstorm. Its in-ground sprinkler system covers only a portion of the cemetery, and the rest of the grass has to be watered with aluminum irrigation pipes.

Lancaster would also like to see a fence on the west boundary, a scattering area for ashes and an office with public restrooms. He’s in charge of maintenance and records and has been doing all the paperwork out of his home. The revenue is barely enough to keep the cemetery running.

“Right now I’m doing the job that 20 years ago we had three men to do,” he said.

Filer Cemetery Association doesn’t do any fundraising, but relies on grave sales for cemetery operations and maintenance. The cemetery has about 3,100 graves dating back to 1907 (two graves had been there before the Odd Fellows opened it as an official burial place).

“The sale of graves has dropped off in the last 10 years,” Lancaster said.

That’s in no small part because more people are choosing cremation, a less expensive option than burial. About five years ago, Filer Cemetery added a columbarium with marble niches for urns. But those sales can’t supply the same revenue the graves once did. Furthermore, 10 percent of that money goes to an irrevocable trust fund.



The columbarium sits mostly vacant Wednesday at the Filer Cemetery.

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Creating a district

The idea is to turn Filer Cemetery into a cemetery that's owned and paid for by the public. And it should actually decrease the cost to families to use it, Lancaster said.

The maintenance district, as proposed, would cover the same boundaries as the Filer School District. Lancaster already has signatures from owners with a combined property value of more than \$1 million – as required by law to get a taxing district on the ballot.

“It’s still kind of in limbo right now,” County Commissioner Jack Johnson said.

With the timeframe required for public notices and hearings, it’s too late to get a cemetery district in the spring election. The Filer Cemetery will also have to find several thousand dollars to pay for a portion of the election.

If voters approved a cemetery district, Lancaster has proposed a modest budget to keep it going without overtaxing residents. He and Kramer feel the cemetery district could be voted on in November.

In the meantime, Lancaster will wait “however long it takes.” Walking among the maze of headstones and monuments, he recalls his family’s history in the Magic Valley, and his own love for the area and its stories.

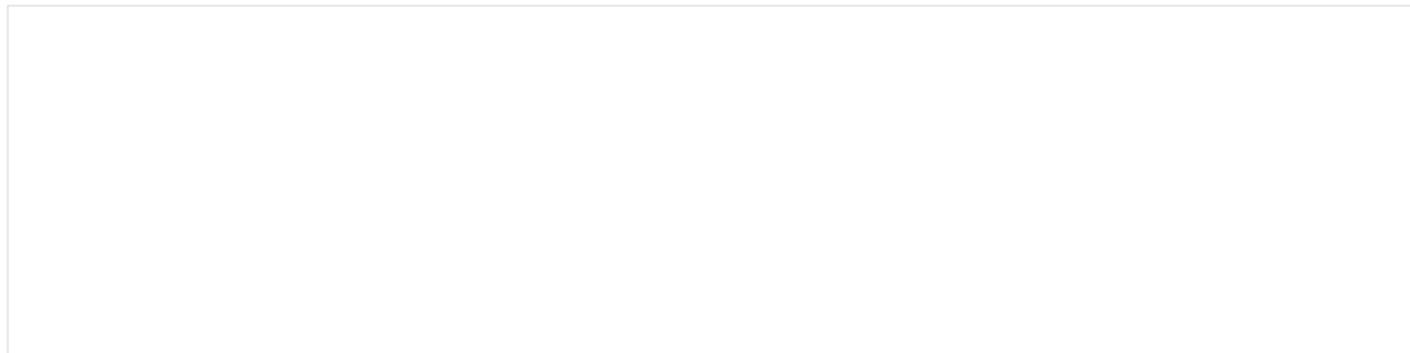
He points to a large monument in one corner, decorated with several names.

“The story is that the father could see Halley’s Comet in the sky at night, and it frightened him,” Lancaster said. “So he killed his children, his wife and himself.”

He can’t verify the truth to this tale, but he can help a visiting family member find the grave of a loved one. Lancaster has compiled an updated map of all the graves. If you look closely, you’ll see the Lancaster surname crop up on several of the headstones.

“I have a bit of a personal attachment to this joint,” he said.

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