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Wednesday June 24, 2009

**Cemetery meeting gets heated**

Steve Fogarty

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Constant Complainer  
What's Goin' On  
Elyria crime reports

AMHERST TOWNSHIP — The peaceful peal of chimes that floated out over the grounds and graves of Ridge Hill Memorial Park on North Ridge Road was in sharp contrast to the sometimes volatile atmosphere during Wednesday's annual meeting, in which conflict of interest charges were leveled at members of the cemetery board of directors.

The allegations were brought by John Penton and Kirsten Hill, Penton's niece and owner of the adjacent Penton Farm Market. They were two of four people vying for two seats on the nonprofit cemetery's governing board.

"No member can be eligible to become a director if they have a financial interest in a competing business," Penton said.

Amherst funeral director William Hempel, who serves as president of the cemetery board, denied Penton's claims, saying the board was supported by several legal opinions, each of which concluded none of the board's members had violated cemetery regulations by selling burial vaults at Ridge Hill.

When a vote of the 70-some people present was taken near the end of the two-hour meeting in a tent on the 100-acre cemetery grounds, Hempel won re-election to another three-year term, while funeral director John Dovin was selected to fill the unexpired term of fellow Lorain funeral director Jerry Hromada, who resigned his seat a month ago.

In lengthy and sometimes emotional remarks made before the vote, Penton charged that Hempel "controls the cemetery like a dictator" and had worked to "puppetize" board members.

"We don't claim to be perfect, but we are an honest and conservative board," Hempel said, declining to address some of Penton's more inflammatory remarks.

The five-member board's other members include Elyria funeral director Dave Dicken. Each is paid \$1,200 a year.

Hempel, Dicken and Dovin all sell burial vaults directly to families, as do most funeral homes, according to Dovin. "It's always been common practice for the funeral home to provide vaults to families."

Only in recent years have cemeteries begun to sell vaults to boost their own revenue, Dovin said.

A well-known local figure regarded as a major player in the development of off-road motorcycle racing in the 1960s and 1970s, Penton irked Hempel when he laughed as Hempel told the group of funeral directors that experience and knowledge of cemetery operations made them better qualified for board seats.

"Show us the respect we accorded you," Hempel said.

The nonprofit Ridge Hill re-invests money from sale of burial plots, bronze memorials and other items in the cemetery and its upkeep. A portion of each sale goes into a perpetual care trust fund that officials said holds approximately \$3.4 million. That money is used to maintain the cemetery now and in the future. About 60 percent developed, Ridge Hill recorded its 20,000th burial in 2008.

During reports on the cemetery's finances, association members were told that Ridge Hill had smaller losses in 2008 than the year before, but still recorded a 10 percent trust fund loss of \$495,000 due in large part to the poor economy, which saw a big drop in burial plot sales from 342 in 2007 to 212 last year.

The group also heard from Don Gleisner, president of the cemetery board in the 1970s, whose wife, son and other family members are buried at Ridge Hill. The once-beautiful cemetery used to be an industry leader, said Gleisner, but has seen its gardens, bell tower, roadways and other amenities deteriorate.

Gleisner asked whether the cemetery's fees and plot costs (starting at \$650) were too low to provide adequate funds.

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"Are you not doing enough business?" he said.

He was told the cemetery looks to boost its revenues with efforts including Patriots Field, a 4.2-acre area that will have more than 4,000 graves set aside for military veterans.

Contact Steve Fogarty at 329-7146 or [sfogarty@chroniclet.com](mailto:sfogarty@chroniclet.com).

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Filed by **Steve Fogarty** June 18th, 2009 in [Local and State](#)

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