



Proposed green cemetery near Verona sparks controversy



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When Meg and A. Neil Skinner go, they want to go green. The town of Springdale residents and longtime environmental and social justice advocates want to be buried at a proposed green cemetery on the property of their good friend Gene Farley.

Farley is proposing to bury 70 to 100 people a year at the Natural Path Sanctuary, which comprises about 25 acres of his property

just west of Verona. There will be no monuments, no embalming, no non-biodegradable caskets — just a simple burial amid a wooded landscape, where nature can take its course.

“We have tried to limit our footprint on the earth while we’re living and don’t particularly have an edifice complex, so we don’t feel the need of a monument and would like to preserve green spaces,” Meg Skinner says.

The Skinners are among a growing number of Americans who hope to be buried in an environmentally friendly way. But their options are limited. Nationwide, there are only about two dozen certified green cemeteries, according to the [Green Burial Council](#), which was founded five years ago.

In June, Iowa County approved [Circle Sanctuary](#) cemetery, a Wiccan burial ground that includes a full body conservation cemetery. Selena Fox, a Wiccan minister who directs the cemetery, says the cemetery has one main prerequisite.

“They have to have a philosophy that respects nature,” says Fox. “But what person who wants a green burial isn’t going to have that?”

But aside from that, there’s nowhere in the state to get buried in a natural setting. In the Dane County area, cemeteries require concrete vaults. Most are maintained with lawn chemicals. And many people are buried after being embalmed with toxic chemicals.

Farley, a retired physician and longtime social activist, plans to bury about 2,500 bodies altogether, providing fertilizer for trees and plants in a sustainable, environmentally friendly manner. The land’s designation as a burial site would, by law, protect it as a nature preserve in perpetuity, and Farley says it would require little maintenance.

“The woods in which people will be buried won’t be manicured,” he says. “There will be a trail through it where people can walk and enjoy, and there will probably be places where people can sit and meditate or sit and reflect.”

And the money from the sales of the burial sites would fund Farley’s Center for Peace, Justice and Sustainability, potentially providing hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to fund an innovative farm incubator program, which right now provides land and equipment to farmers.

The operation, now in its 15th year, provides a livelihood to farmers who sell their vegetables, flowers and honey at farmers markets or to small grocery stores in the area. Most of them are immigrants who could never afford to farm on their own.

“Basically, it’s people who want to do farming but don’t have an extra \$200,000 or \$300,000 to buy land and equipment,” says Janet Parker, who oversees the farming operation on Farley’s land.

But the plan has been held up by neighbors who fear that a cemetery will take a bite out of their property values.

“I have a lot invested, so I obviously have to protect my assets,” says neighbor Brian Raffel, who’s trying to sell his home, assessed at \$2 million, which lies on property adjacent to Farley’s land.

Raffel is not alone. Several neighbors signed a letter to the Springdale Town Board opposing the cemetery. The town’s planning commission voted it down in July, but Supervisor Wayne Hefty says the Town Board will likely give it a thumbs up at its Sept. 13 meeting.

That would pave the way for the final hurdle: approval of a conditional use permit by the county’s zoning committee. And Farley hopes to be able to begin selling plots early next year.

While Meg Skinner, who is in her 60s, can wait for the details to be ironed out, Neil is running out of time. He’s 88 and under hospice care after suffering a series of strokes.

Right now, the only body buried on the 29-acre nature preserve is that of Gene’s wife, Linda Farley, who died last year of cancer.

Farley likes to quote his youngest grandson, who says: “Grandma’s there. She’s feeding a tree.”

The burial ground was the brainchild of Farley’s three sons, who stood to gain financially if they sold the property upon Farley’s death, but who decided to dedicate the land to continuing their parents’ life work of promoting social justice.

Meg Skinner says that even if other green cemeteries existed in the area, she and her husband specifically want to be laid to rest on the Farleys’ land.

“It has the added benefit of supporting a cause we believe in,” she says.

Farley says he's doing everything he can to accommodate the concerns of his neighbors, but they just can't get past the "ick factor" of having a cemetery near their properties.

But Tim Esser says it's not an irrational fear that drives his opposition. He worries that the cemetery threatens to contaminate well water, despite that fact that a hydrologist hired by Farley says it won't.

And he points to the fact that the appraiser hired by Raffel, as well as the town's assessor, have told town officials that the cemetery will hurt property values.

"It reduces your pool of buyers, which reduces your value," Esser says.

Peter McKeever, an attorney with Garvey, McNeil and Associates who is handling Farley's case, counters that there is no evidence to suggest that cemeteries reduce property values. Indeed, he says, in many cases they enhance them.

His own survey of homes on Virginia Terrace, which runs along Forest Hill Cemetery on Madison's near west side, shows that homes abutting the cemetery are worth an average of \$22,000 more than homes across the street.

At any rate, he says, the cemetery will be invisible from neighboring properties.

There are few studies dealing with property values in relation to cemeteries, and none dealing with green cemeteries. But McKeever says one study involving four cemeteries in Ohio showed that in two cases the property values were unaffected, in another they were enhanced, and in the fourth, they were diminished.

Hefty, the Springdale town supervisor, says the board doesn't believe anyone made the case that property values are an issue.

"We feel that it's a moot point," he says. "It's a stigma that is going to pass. Initially there may be some difference, but most of it is going to be stigma and all the people that came in and testified that the values were going to be reduced, when it came down to the fine points they couldn't prove their point and backed off their position."

Farley's cemetery would be the first in the nation that would be connected with a social justice endeavor, and Farley says he's had a number of people approach him who want to reserve a burial plot.

"There's demand," he says. "I don't know how big it is, but we have a lot of friends who are very interested."

Pat McNally, managing director for Cress Funeral and Cremation Service, which operates eight funeral homes in Dane County, confirms that there is demand for green burials and that it's growing.

Cress has for years tried to meet it by offering biodegradable products. One casket is crafted from sea grass, and they offer a cremation urn made of salt.

"We're really pleased to hear there may be a green cemetery opening in the area because at this point people interested in it haven't had a lot of options," McNally says.

In the Madison area, cemeteries will allow for unembalmed bodies — traditional Jewish ceremonies forbid embalming — but they have to be entombed in a concrete vault, not because of any law, but because cemeteries want to keep the grounds flat.

“Without them the graves will settle and you have kind of a dipping effect,” McNally says. “So it’s hard to keep them manicured the way people have come to expect them to be.”

For those who want their final act to have minimal impact on the planet, that’s not good enough.

McNally says funeral homes can arrange for burials in green cemeteries in other parts of the country, “but often they have to travel so far that they have to consider the environmental consequences of flying out to the east or driving. And also, it’s so far away it’s harder to visit.”

Cress has recently joined the Green Burial Council, a Santa Fe, N.M., organization formed five years ago to set standards for green burials and to certify that green burial products are as environmentally friendly as they claim to be.

Joe Sehee, who founded the Green Burial Council in 2005, says his group has certified about two dozen green cemeteries, but many have failed financially.

Part of the problem, he says, is that funeral homes that offer green services are few and far between.

“You can have a green cemetery, but if you don’t have funeral homes in the area handling unembalmed bodies, good luck,” he says.

Sehee says he has about 350 funeral homes in his network offering green services. And he’s become involved in every aspect of the burial industry, from product manufacturers to cemetery operators, to find ways to make green burials more available to those who want them.

And the number of those who want them is growing as baby boomers start to consider their mortality.

A 2007 AARP poll found that 21 percent of respondents age 50 or older would be interested or very interested in green burial services. This year, a similar poll by the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association found that 31 percent of respondents, most of them over 50, would be very interested in environmentally friendly services.

Sehee, who wants to instill a conservation ethic into the funeral industry, says the Midwest has been particularly receptive to green burials, likely because cremations have made less of a dent in the number of traditional services than they have in other parts of the country.

“In states where there’s a rich tradition of funeral service, it’s easier for someone to go from a conventional funeral service to a green funeral service, than direct cremation to a green funeral,” he says.

And just like cremations, he thinks green burials are going to be a trend that funeral homes and cemeteries can't ignore for long.

"If you think about where cremation was at 40 years ago, it was under 5 percent, and it's just under 40 percent today," he says. "I think once this is presented as an option, which it really hasn't been, I think it's going to rival cremation and traditional burial."