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Green Revolution Hits Dead End In Georgia Cemetery Proposal

Ms. Collins Thought Natural Burials Were a Killer Idea; Locals Saw Grave Threat

By PHILIP SHISHKIN

MACON, Ga. -- Elizabeth Collins, a gardener, birdwatcher and a self-described "renaissance woman," wanted to start a "natural" cemetery where bodies would be buried without embalming, coffins or vaults.

She and a partner bought a plot of land here and wrote a business plan that identified pagans, "old hippies," penny pinchers, environmentalists and Muslims -- who traditionally bury the dead without caskets -- as their target market. There would be room for 7,500 customers. Dead pets would be welcome, too.

The idea didn't sit well with the living.

Many residents in this socially conservative rural patch of central Georgia worried the cemetery would contaminate their water supply. Some also objected in principle to unconventional burial practices.

So on Nov. 4, the Macon-Bibb County commissioners killed the cemetery plan by voting in a new ordinance that requires a "leak-proof casket or vault" for burials. It became one of the first legal moves against a growing brand of environmentalism that is entering the graveyard.

Advocates of natural, or "green," cemeteries say conventional burials pollute the earth with embalming chemicals, disturb the land and waste energy in the production and transport of coffins and vaults.

"People who go to Whole Foods or Wild Oats are going to expect to have green offerings in a funeral home," says Darren Crouch, whose company, Passages International, makes biodegradable funeral supplies. Mr. Crouch says sales in 2008 were up 40% from 2007.

In the U.S., there are about 14 environmentally friendly cemeteries, up from just one a decade ago, and a few dozen more are in development, according to the Green Burial Council, a nonprofit that was established in 2005 and certifies sustainable cemeteries.

"I get a lot of calls from people thinking it's a groovy alternative to opening a bed-and-breakfast," says council director Joe Sehee.

Traditional funeral directors, who make money selling coffins and embalming services, have been ambivalent about green burials. But some say they don't want to miss out on the opportunity, as many in the business did when cremation took off a generation ago. In 2007, *The Director*, the monthly magazine of the National Funeral Directors Association, featured a cover story titled "Margins lean? Consider green."

As the headline suggests, green doesn't have to mean cheap. Passages International makes a \$1,600 woven willow casket, which looks like an oversized picnic hamper. It also sells a \$300 cremation urn made of "Himalayan rock salt" that "will dissolve within four hours when placed in water."

'Tower of Silence'

One green-funeral enthusiast, George Russell, has founded a religion called "Ethician" centered on the practice, and says he's buried nine bodies in his Texas cemetery since 2003, including his mother wrapped in a blanket. He's now raising money to build a "tower of silence" -- an elevated platform where bodies would be left to decompose in the open with vultures hastening the process, as is done in the Zoroastrian faith. Mr. Russell recently invited a Zoroastrian priest from Mumbai to survey the Texas site. He says the priest found the local vulture population suitable for the task.

In Jewish and Muslim funerals, bodies are buried either in simple wooden coffins or wrapped in cloth, but many in the new green movement want to go further. They favor no tombstones or bulky grave markers that would disturb the natural environment. Visitors can find a grave's precise locale using GPS coordinates.

State laws typically require cemeteries to maintain a certain cash reserve for long-term upkeep of the plots. But they generally don't require the use of caskets or vaults. In most cases, embalming, which helps preserve bodies for viewing, isn't required by law, either.

Ms. Collins, the green-cemetery entrepreneur in Georgia, says "everything in my life has led me to this." In her backyard in Bonaire, Ga., Ms. Collins, 56 years old, has buried her cat, hamsters and a fox that she found dead by the side of the road. Sometimes, she goes to old cemeteries for picnics.

The silver-haired former computer programmer drives a Toyota Prius hybrid. In an aviary behind her single-story house, she has a bowl with rotting bananas for breeding bugs to feed her latest passion: carnivorous plants. A patch of them, with pink tubular stalks, grows by her front door.

"I find God in nature," says Ms. Collins.

Ms. Collins says she was influenced by "The American Way of Death," Jessica Mitford's 1963 book that portrays the funeral industry as peddling unnecessary and overpriced goods and services to customers too much in grief to question it.

When her son died two years ago, Ms. Collins avoided embalming, but bought an otherwise conventional funeral because no alternative was available. She pitched her green cemetery idea to James Wood, an old friend who manages a Zaxby's chicken outlet in Macon. Each invested about \$50,000 to buy 58 acres on a woody hillside. In April 2008, the Macon-Bibb County Planning and Zoning Commission approved use of the

land for a cemetery.

Neighbors' Reaction

Down the road from the proposed burial ground, Cherrie Mittmann was stewing. Like most of her neighbors, Ms. Mittmann, a 59-year-old housecleaner, draws water from a well on her property. She worried that decomposing remains would leach into the aquifer feeding the well, and that animals would dig up unboxed bodies. Ms. Mittmann says she has no proof that either scenario would play out, but doesn't want to wonder what her dog might be holding in its maw. Natural-cemetery advocates say stories of animals digging up human remains are little more than urban myths.

Neighbors are still upset that they were unsuccessful in their efforts to stop a nearby landfill, which they say fills the air with foul smells. "We are the rug in this corner of middle Georgia," says Ms. Mittmann, who was also worried the cemetery would cheapen the value of her house. "Whatever you don't want to clean up, you sweep under that rug."

Ms. Collins says the water supply would be safe because the graves are too far away to leach into the aquifer. But to make the cemetery more acceptable, she and Mr. Wood reduced its capacity from 7,500 bodies to 750, and decided to give up on burying pets.

That didn't pacify opponents. Ms. Collins and Mr. Wood "were more concerned about appeasing dead out-of-town customers than they were the living residents," says Donnie Bryant, pastor of the Swift Creek Baptist Church in Macon. Founded by freed slaves, the church has buried people in traditional fashion in its own graveyard since 1868.

Ms. Collins hasn't given up yet on winning the locals over to her side. She says her foes have an illogical fear of natural burials -- and of out-of-towners: "This community is very insular and is not welcoming."

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