

Pets, owners can now share a final resting place

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By Linda Wilson Fuoco, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

There are many cemeteries set aside solely for pets buried by the people who loved them when they were alive. A Mercer County funeral home has gone a step beyond that, creating a 10-acre cemetery where people and their pets can be buried together.

Hillcrest Memorial Park Pet Gardens is part of the 71-acre cemetery and memorial park in Hermitage that is also the site of the famous Avenue of 444 Flags, erected to honor Americans held hostage in Iran for 444 days -- from Nov. 4, 1979, to Jan. 20, 1981.

A buffer of trees and shrubs will screen and separate the pets and people section of the cemetery from the traditional section where people have been buried for decades, said John Flynn, who owns and operates John Flynn Funeral Home and Crematory. The cemetery, owned and operated by his father, Tom Flynn, also has a pets-only section.

Hillcrest Pet Gardens isn't the only cemetery offering people the chance to spend eternity with their pets, but this service "is very cutting edge," said Robert Fells, general counsel for the International Cemetery and Funeral Association in Sterling, Va.

"I'm not sure there are laws prohibiting animals from being buried with people" but most sales agreements for human burial plots stipulate that the land is for the interment of human remains, Mr. Fells said.

"We are living in interesting times," Mr. Fells said. National associations of funeral home operators "have all offered programs" for members interested in extending their services to pets.

There are about 800 pet cemeteries in the United States, according to the Web site of the nonprofit International Association of Pet Cemeteries and Crematories, founded in 1971.

"Many people have asked if they could be buried with their pets. Others have said they wouldn't want to be buried in a cemetery where animals are buried," Mr. Flynn said, which is why the burial areas will be kept separate.

Typically the pets die first and are buried, in their own casket. When the pet owners die, they would be buried in their caskets in the same plot.

"We applied for and received a zoning amendment from Hermitage officials," Mr. Flynn said.

The city's zoning laws did not prohibit burying pets with people, according to Marcia Hirschmann, director of the Planning and Development Department. "The zoning ordinance did not address pet cemeteries. A text amendment to the Hermitage Zoning Ordinance to provide for pet cemeteries was approved in May 2005" at the request of Mr. Flynn, she said.

"When we built a crematory, many people asked if we could cremate pets," John Flynn said. "That's not permitted" by state law. "We saw a need so we put in a separate crematory for pets."

He also added a building with two viewing rooms for dead pets. The animals will not be embalmed, but they will be bathed and groomed by staff. Family pets and the pets of friends and relatives will be welcome to attend the viewings.

The John Flynn Pet Funeral Home and Crematory is on the grounds of the cemetery, across the street from the traditional funeral home for people.

An open house will be held today through Sunday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

"When we held an open house for the crematory seven years ago, we wondered if anyone would come. We had 1,000 visitors," Mr. Flynn said. A "media preview" for the pet facilities, held yesterday, was well-attended, and many area veterinarians sent RSVPs indicating they would come to an open house held for them last night.

"We've been in touch with veterinarians and they are very interested," Mr. Flynn said. "We've offered to work with them to deal with families" grieving over the loss of a pet.

Part of the Pet Garden package includes "pickup available" 24 hours per day, seven days per week. The funeral home will pick up dead pets at the family's home or at the veterinarian's clinic. The funeral home will even go to a home to pick up a sick animal and take it to the veterinarian to be euthanized. Also provided is an "after-care program" to provide "ongoing support and grief counseling," Mr. Flynn said. No viewings have been held yet. There have been inquiries, but no one has purchased plots in the pets-and-people portion of the cemetery. Several animals have been buried in the pets-only section of the cemetery and a number have been cremated.

"We've had 25 death calls for dogs and cats in the last month," Mr. Flynn said. "Unfortunately, one of those was my family's 15-year-old Siamese cat, Mocha."

Mocha will not be buried in the cemetery. "We discussed it with our children and they decided they wanted to have her cremated. The ashes are in an urn in our house."

Pet cremations are usually \$150 to \$495, depending on the size of the animal and the urn or other container chosen for the ashes.

The average all-inclusive price to bury an animal will be about \$700, including a headstone, Mr. Flynn said. "You could spend less or you could spend more" depending on the type of headstone and casket chosen.

Materials used for pet caskets range from Styrofoam, plastic or metal to a wide range of woods. "They can be \$100 to \$1,000 or more," Mr. Flynn said. "There is a huge range," including high-end caskets made of mahogany.

Do mainstream religions have any objections to animals being buried with people?

"I'm been here for 24 years" at the International Cemetery and Funeral Association "and you're the first person to ask that question," Mr. Fells said yesterday. "You may be blazing new ground there." Mr. Flynn said he has not had any feedback from clergy, and in any case, his family's cemetery is non-sectarian.