Bolton Local seeks green burial option

By Apara Borrowes

Bolton Local is working to help bring a green burial option to Bolton, and took more steps in that direction, holding a well-attended panel discussion about green burial at the Bolton Library on March 20.

Roger Breeze, Brenda Baum, and Harold Brown of the Bolton Cemetery Commission, along with Bolton’s new DPW Director Joseph Lynch, were present for the event, which was organized by Bolton Local’s Betsy Taylor-Kennedy and Lynn Dischler. Bolton Local is a grassroots effort that has a stated mission of building a strong, self-reliant community, committed to living sustainably on the planet in a way that inspires a hopeful vision for the future.

Taylor-Kennedy opened the event, introducing the panelists: Eva Moseley, a board member of Green Burial Massachusetts; Candace Currie, Director of Planning and Sustainability at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge; and Thomas Comeau, Funeral Director at the Philbin-Comeau Funeral Home in Clinton.

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Speaker Eva Moseley, Bolton Local’s Betsy Taylor-Kennedy, Speaker Candace Currie, and Bolton Local President Laura Kischitz

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Betsy Taylor-Kennedy’s photo shows a woodland scene typical of what green burial advocates seek for combined land conservation and green burial.

Listeners learned the basics of green burial from experts who explained that green burial offers an alternative to current mainstream burial and cremation practices, allowing the remains of a loved one to be buried in a plain pine box or shroud, without embalming.

Moseley reviewed why green burial is gaining interest as an alternative to standard burial practices in America. She said that green burial allows the components of the body, which came from the earth, to return to the earth, completing the cycle of life and death in a way that is in harmony with the workings of nature.

“Cremation uses a large amount of energy, and pollutes the air,” Moseley said, “and conventional burial puts a lot of extra things in the earth which we don’t really need,” like the concrete vaults required in graves, and embalming chemicals. “What could be better than the body helping plants to grow, by returning its valuable elements to the soil to nurture ongoing life?” asked Moseley, who is a gardener. Moseley is an advocate, with Green Burial Massachusetts, for combining the goal of land conservation with green burial.

Candace Currie, also a board member of Green Burial Mass., oversees green burials at Mount Auburn Cemetery, one of the rare cemeteries in Massachusetts allowing green burial. “Everything going into the grave is biodegradable,” she explained.

“Soil is mounded on top of a green burial, with evergreen boughs laid on top, to allow for natural settling of the earth over time,” said Currie. “My experience working with this type of burial, is that filling in the grave is really cathartic for people, and you don’t get the same experience with conventional burial.”

Noting that all burials used to be green burials, Currie outlined how embalming came into wider use in the United States in the 1860s, to help get the bodies of soldiers killed in the Civil War home to families in better shape. Over time, embalming gained favor in burial practice, eventually leading to exclusion of green burial.

“Embalming is not a state law,” Currie said, “and it’s not done for protecting public health.” It’s standard cemetery practice to require a grave liner or concrete vault, but these are not required by state law, she noted, adding that she expects to see an increasing demand for green burial.

Funeral home director Thomas Comeau spoke of his experience assisting with a green burial for a man whose wife requested help in carrying out her husband’s Native American cultural traditions. Comeau said it was a deeply moving experience for everyone involved.

“Death care is rooted in rituals and customs, including religious, cultural, and geographic, and also in economic considerations,” he noted.
The best advice I can give to you all is talk to your family. Explain your wishes so they can follow through," he said. He noted that cemetery restrictions can get in the way, but there are many resources online. He added that green burials usually occur within 48 hours of death, so making advance plans is important.

Comeau offered the services of his funeral home in Clinton to assist any families wishing to have help with green burial.

Attendee Maureen Kunz reflected, "There are so many aspects to this that feel personally right and ecologically right. Someone might be happy knowing that in death one gives back to the world." She said she'd like Bolton to have an area where green burials are allowed.

Cemetery Commission member Roger Breeze offered, "We're open to figuring out different ways to do this. This is obviously the next step. It's got to be an alternative for some people. It's a nice thought."

"Green burial is better for the environment, and is also a philosophy," noted Taylor-Kennedy, who travels yearly with her British husband, Gordon Taylor, to England, where green burial is the norm.

"We're glad to see the enthusiasm and interest from the people who came. People can keep the momentum going by spreading the word to others," said Taylor-Kennedy. She intends to keep in touch with the Cemetery Commission. She noted that the Cemetery Commission has already identified a Bolton cemetery as a possibility. "It will take time," said Taylor-Kennedy, "and we won't give up." The program was filmed for Bolton TV. See www.boltonlocal.org and www.greenburialma.org for more information.