

Cemetery adds columbarium for cremains

By ALEX HARGRAVE

alex@buffalobulletin.com

Johnson County's Willow Grove Cemetery has a new kind of final resting place available for reservation.

The Johnson County Cemetery District board discussed its new columbarium at its July 14 meeting. A columbarium is a wall that houses cremated remains in compartments called niches.

At Willow Grove, there will initially be two columbariums, each with 32 niches, said Sexton Shawn Sullivan. Each niche can hold up to two cremains.

The district's decision to offer a new burial option is in line with burial trends in Wyoming, Sullivan said. Cremation rates have increased in Wyoming in the past several years, with nearly 80% of residents choosing to be cremated at the time of death, according to the National Funeral Directors Association.

"Families aren't being buried in the same cemetery anymore," Sullivan said at the district meeting. "Now, it's just mom and dad. Kids are going away; they don't live close, they may only get here three to four years at a time to do any kind of grave maintenance."

A niche in the columbarium is a low maintenance option that will be open to both residents and nonresidents, board member Liz Graves said.

"The benefit I see for people to choose the columbarium is there's no maintenance for them, they don't have to worry about family coming later on to take care of a gravesite or family dies out, it's a maintenance-free thing," she said. "It's a

one-time, one and done thing."

The board voted to charge \$300 for residents for a space in the columbarium with no opening or closing fees and \$600 for those who do not pay property taxes in the county with a \$75 fee for each opening and closing. Engraving will be the responsibility of the owner, and the board can object to offensive content.

The columbarium has been in the works since 2021, according to previous Bulletin reporting. The niche walls, shipping, concrete, outside labor, landscaping and other associated costs totaled \$53,636 for the district.

Purchasing a niche rather than a cemetery plot is an option associated with less maintenance, Sullivan said in an interview. Cemetery staff maintain the cemetery and individual plots, but, traditionally, families also visited their loved ones' graves and made improvements periodically.

"As we move farther away from our hometowns, it makes it much harder to come back to those places," Sullivan said. "... We believe that cremation is on the rise as a trend in our culture, so we're trying to be more accommodating to that trend."

The Kaycee Cemetery will also have a columbarium installed. Sullivan said that while cemetery district staff work on a fence project in Kaycee, they will also work on installation of the columbarium.

"I think you guys will see this pick up at some speed, and you guys will be purchasing some more columbariums in the years to come," Sullivan told the board. "I expect this to sell out very quickly, honestly."