

# Cemetery caretakers to retire

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## Friends speak of thirty years of dedication

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Lifelong friends Tom Weir and Ted Ure have dedicated the past three decades to maintaining Fairbairn Cemetery in their hometown of Sandwich South. Now, both in their seventies, the pair want to retire from the job and relinquish the graveyard, where many of their friends and family are buried.

"Everything we do is free. We've just done it because somebody has to take care of it for the community, that's all," said Ure, 73. "It's just reaching the point where we're getting too old and want the city to take over."

Councillors will vote Tuesday night to determine whether the city will assume responsibility for the operation and maintenance of the quiet, neatly-trimmed cemetery on Baseline Road.

"We look after cutting the grass, and if somebody dies, we've got to come down and mark the grave out," explained Weir, 75. "It's a lot of work and you have to know what you're doing."

While many think of cemeteries as reminders of loss and sadness, Weir said it no longer has that effect on him.

"I guess you just get used to it. I went to school with a lot of the people buried here," he



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Tom Weir, 75, and Ted Ure, 73, have managed the Fairbairn Cemetery for more than 30 years on a volunteer basis.

said. "My wife and all my family are buried here, too."

Over the years, Weir and Ure have encountered some grim surprises.

"Sometimes when we mark a plot it's a problem when we find a person was buried where they shouldn't have been, before we started taking it over," said Weir. "It doesn't happen too often."

To this day, there are still burial certificates for individuals who are not marked by graves. "When people come here and they see the cemetery's been taken care of that's the satisfaction I think these two guys get of knowing that whoever's buried here has been respected," said George Fairbairn, whose great-grandfather's uncle owned the graveyard many years ago.

"It was a very tough decision for Ted and Tom," added Fairbairn, who has been assisting with the maintenance for the past 10 years as well.

"They really care about it and they struggled with this. But it's not easy to be in your seventies and be marking out plots in the middle of the winter."

While the men are sad to let the cemetery go after so many years of tireless care, both plan to eventually return as a final resting place with their families.

Wira Vendrasco, the deputy city solicitor who co-authored the Fairbairn report that will go to council for approval, said the city will undertake a steep learning curve as it takes over

its first cemetery.

"It's been hard getting our heads around it," she said, noting that the city must first devise a business plan before it will know whether charging market-rate prices could bring in revenue, or at least cover costs. "It's quite an enterprise."

Windsor officially acquired the cemetery in 2003, when it annexed 23,000 hectares of land from Tecumseh. But only recently, when the current caretakers said they couldn't continue forever, did Windsor officials fully realize they had some tombstones on their hands.

If council approves the cemetery deal, the parks department will likely run the operation, though even that is not carved in stone. The city could end up hiring an outside contractor to manage the two-acre grounds with 930 plots — 335 of which have already been filled or purchased. So until plans are as firm as a will, the city won't sell any plots. Nothing seems dead easy about running a cemetery.

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