

State money to fund Whispering Maples work

Repairs eye for Whispering Maples towns of Plattsburgh, Ellenburg

By DAN HEATH Press-Republican, 4/12/2017

PLATTSBURGH — Plattsburgh Town Supervisor Michael Cashman was relieved to learn the new state budget includes \$2 million for repairs and renovations of the Whispering Maples mausoleums in Plattsburgh and Ellenburg.

"We are extremely appreciative of Sen. (Betty) Little's leadership with this. She has been with us right from the get-go," he said.

TERRIBLE SHAPE

In 2015, the New York State Division of Cemeteries declared the mausoleums abandoned cemeteries under state law, due to inadequate revenues and funds to cover future obligations.

It then mandated the towns of Plattsburgh and Ellenburg to each assume responsibility for the mausoleum within its borders.

The facilities had fallen into disrepair over the years, with leaky roofs, water damage and substandard construction among the issues.

Little toured the mausoleums shortly after then-Town Supervisor Bernie Bassett notified her of the state's mandate.

"These two mausoleums were in terrible shape," she said. "They need a lot of improvement, and they're going to get it."

Little said she was able to have the funding included as a line item in the New York State Department of State's abandoned-cemetery fund. It is specifically earmarked for the towns of Plattsburgh and Ellenburg, which should allow for a more rapid release of funds.

The state needed to take responsibility for the facilities, she said, as the deterioration occurred under the supervision of the Division of Cemeteries.

"It had to be taken care of. They couldn't be left the way they were," she said.

STAYING ON

Little also secured \$300,000 for perpetual-care costs, to be divided between the towns, in last year's budget.

And she has drafted legislation that would prohibit standalone mausoleums in the future, which she hopes to see passed in the upcoming legislative session so the situation is not repeated.

The Whispering Maples matter has been extremely distressing to loved ones of those interred in the mausoleums.

Both Little and Cashman praised the efforts of Town of Queensbury Cemetery Superintendent Connie Goedert.

Goedert accepted an appointment by the state to act as a receiver to handle operation of the mausoleums and prepare the path for the towns to take control, and she is being reimbursed only for her expenses as she fulfills that role.

She has been reappointed on several occasions and is presently approved through the end of June.

"My wish is to stay on through the end of the project," she said, adding that could be as early as this fall.

MAJOR STEPS COMING

Goedert is presently reviewing the bids received for repairs and renovations to ensure they meet requirements and can be submitted for state approval. She is also preparing a list of expenses that have been incurred so far to present to the state for reimbursement.

"I would like to see some major steps moving forward within the next couple weeks," she said.

Cashman said the \$2 million should cover the cost of repairs, but a final determination will need to wait until contracts are awarded and the work is complete.

"We are cautiously optimistic," he said.

PATIENCE APPRECIATED

The towns have agreed not to take title of the mausoleums until they are in proper condition, Cashman said.

While they have worked to make sure the towns were not left to foot the bill for repairs, he said, they also recognized the moral responsibility to rectify the situation.

All involved thanked the families with loved ones interred at Whispering Maples for the patience as the saga unfolds.

Others have helped throughout the process, Cashman said, including former State Assemblywoman Janet Duprey (R-Peru), current Assemblyman Billy Jones (D-Chateaugay) and the numerous local officials who sent letters of support for the funding.

"These facilities are in the towns of Ellenburg and Plattsburgh, but many of those laid to rest in them are from other communities," Cashman said.