

Pet funeral and memorial service

Laurie Crouch

ABSTRACT

The death of a companion animal can be as devastating for most pet owners as the loss of any close family member. However, the options available to formally say goodbye and recognise a lost pet in a sympathetic environment is limited. This is about to change in the City of Stirling Western Australia with the establishment of a pet funeral and memorial service.

A new purpose built facility incorporating a formal funeral lounge where grieving owners can mourn the loss of their pet in a dignified and appropriate manner forms part of this unique plan. The Council has commissioned the manufacture of a purpose built pet crematorium that will cater for individual cremations. Memorial niche walls and plaques will be established with plans to utilise City managed public open space and reserve areas as remembrance sites.

INTRODUCTION

The window of opportunity for this new venture was largely dictated by the construction of a new Animal Care Facility within the City. A pet funeral and memorial service was identified some time ago by the City's Deputy Chief Executive Officer as a service that was both appropriate and beneficial to the community. The delay, until now, in establishing the service was essentially a result of the City not having a suitable facility. The animal impounding facility was the most appropriate site but the existing design and infrastructure at the site restricted opportunities. In addition there was always a fear the site would be redeveloped and the pound relocated elsewhere. When the opportunity to redevelop was confirmed, a pet funeral and memorial service formed part of the plan.

At the time of preparation of this paper final touches are being completed on the new facility and relocation from the old pound is under way. The impounding facility for the kennelling of stray and impounded animals will be immediately operational however the pet funeral and memorial service will not be operational until landscaping of the site, including the construction of a memorial niche wall has been undertaken. The groundwork in preparation for the facility is nearing completion and a business plan on the concept will shortly be delivered to Council then formally advertised in accordance with legislative requirements.

THE CONCEPT

We understood from an early stage that we were in an excellent position to offer this type of service. Firstly, we own and operate a crematorium. This is a sad but essential component for the disposal of deceased animals. Secondly, we are in the business of providing animal services. Although compliance, education and pound services have to-date been our main areas of responsibility, there is no reason why we cannot provide funeral services to people who have lost their loved pet. Thirdly, we manage and maintain reserves and public open space areas that are ideal locations for memorials and remembrance sites.

The City intends to achieve the following objectives with the Pet Funeral and Memorial service:

1. Provide services to people that:
 - enable them to say goodbye to their deceased pet in a sympathetic environment;
 - enable the City of Stirling to dispose of deceased animals in a sympathetic and environmentally friendly manner;
 - provide the City with a positive cash flow;
 - use City managed public open space and reserves as venues for memorial walls/walks to commemorate pets.

2. Support the relocation and maintenance of the City's Impounding Facility for dogs and cats.

Research on similar facilities in the eastern states of Australia and the United States indicates that services of this type are well patronised and are capable of generating income for the operators. Demographically, in many households pets are taking the place physically and emotionally, of children. Pet owners have shown a willingness to provide for their animal companions a range of services that were previously only reserved for people.

An opportunity exists to provide services to others including residents living outside our district, other local governments and veterinarians. These services may be funeral and memorial services or simply cremation services. The services and products offered will include -

Funeral service

The funeral service will be a service where owners can mourn the loss of a pet in a compassionate and appropriate way. The service provided can be either low-key and relatively informal, or as formal as a client wishes. They may choose to participate in a service where invited family and friends can attend and respectfully mourn the passing of their companion pet. They may choose to speak in tribute to the life of the lost companion or have our staff do so on their behalf.

The funeral lounge will have the capacity to seat up to 20 people comfortably with standing room for up to 30 more. Facilities for candles and flowers will be available and the funeral lounge has a tape/compact disk system should special music be required.

The funeral lounge has a separate casket removal room that is sensitively equipped with mood lighting and a curtained viewing area.

Clients may also wish to conduct a formal funeral service with us, then perform their own burial elsewhere. The service provided by the City will not include a cemetery or burial services at this time.

Cremation service

The facility has a purpose built incinerator that will cater for individual cremations. Ashes can be collected and returned or placed in a memorial wall or garden at the client's request. Clients may choose to purchase an urn and take ashes home. Or simply request that they be scattered or placed elsewhere in remembrance of a lost pet.

The City has owned and operated a crematorium for many years. Its use, in the past however, has been predominantly limited to the disposal of pound animals.

Only a small number of Local Governments in Western Australia currently have or utilise cremation facilities. The majority place deceased animals in plastic bags and they are buried on mass, at landfill sites. Although this method of disposal is generally accepted in the industry, is it reasonable? What are others doing? Is the landfill option an economic alternative? Would your community be satisfied knowing you used this method of disposal? If you utilise the mass burial method, do you make provision for the deceased animals to be appropriately carried to the landfill site then have a site specially excavated? Or are the animals simply transported with general household rubbish via the Council compactor truck and disposed of along with other household rubbish? To me it seems that cremations are by far a more appropriate method of disposal.

Memorial service

Memorial niche walls will be constructed within the grounds of the facility. Clients will be able to choose a location and have words inscribed on face plaques that will cover the ashes of a lost pet. Owners will be able to pre-arrange a location and have double or multiple sites reserved if desired. Garden memorials will also be established in order to scatter ashes and place an inscribed plaque.

Memorials are also planned within public open space and reserve areas. These sites will be particularly popular as they will be the areas where many owners will have spent considerable time enjoying the company of and exercising their lost pet. The normal memorial tenure will be 10 years however this term may be extended, on payment of a fee, if desired.

Products

Plaques, urns and caskets will be on display and available for sale. To reduce overheads, these items will be held on consignment and replaced following a sale.

Other services

A number of other services will be available including transporting the deceased animal, counselling grieving owners and providing Internet obituaries.

Historically in Western Australia, councils have not previously offered animal funeral and memorial services. A small number of private operators do provide some services to the public however few advertise complete funeral and memorial services. Most private operators specialise in offering cremation services. There are several pet cemeteries located on the outskirts of the metropolitan area.

A TIME FOR CHANGE

We understood from an early stage that a number of changes were necessary in order to be successful. One of these is the changing of beliefs and attitudes of our staff and the public in respect to our services. Our compliance role of enforcing various legislation, issuing fines and impounding stray animals often places us in a position of being the one to blame - the easy target. Well sorry! Don't blame us. Blame society, blame those people who abandon animals, blame those who allow their dogs to wander or those who keep their dogs confined to the point where they are socially unacceptable and become neighbourhood nuisances. As part of this philosophy of changing beliefs and attitudes, we decided to call the new development 'The City of Stirling Animal Care Facility'. Much much better than just 'The Pound'.

DESIGNING A FACILITY

The facility was designed, in consultation with city officers, by James Christou Architects. James was also commissioned to design a new works depot being simultaneously built on a site opposite.

The site chosen for the facility is centrally placed within the City and is situated adjacent to a public reserve on a bushland site populated with native species. Wildflowers bloom at various times throughout the year and particular care was taken not to fragment the natural appearance of the area. An opportunity exists for the expansion and development of memorial bushland walks at a later stage.

We had a relatively good understanding of what we wanted in respect to our needs for impounded animals. Similarly we had experience and information on what was needed with regard to designing a crematorium and establishing memorials. However, we were a little perplexed at exactly what was needed to conduct pet funerals.

A delegation from the City led by the Mayor also visited an Animal Memorial Cemetery and Crematorium in NSW to look over an operating facility. They were encouraged by their visit with the proprietor opening his doors and sharing his experiences in the industry. I also drew on my past experiences from field trips and networking contacts while attending Urban Animal Management conferences. I had a number of photographs and obtained further information talking with people involved in the industry.

Creating a design, sensitive to both impounded animals and pet funeral services was somewhat of a challenge. We didn't want a facility that was visually and operationally insensitive to each issue.

The building we designed included a large flexible space for our formal funeral lounge. This was the area where funeral services would be held and grieving owners can mourn the loss of their companion pet. The lounge area incorporates mood lighting and a casket removal room. The area is sensitively decorated with warm colours and natural timber finishes. The lounge also has tea and coffee making facilities and a number of display cabinets. This area serves as a consulting room where clients can plan and select the appropriate service for their lost pet.

The building, constructed from concrete tilt panels, also incorporates an entrance foyer, an office, a storeroom, an identification room, a crematorium, dog kennels, cat areas, an isolation area and an exercise yard and cleaner's room. The kennels for impounded dogs and cats are fully enclosed. A sound lock wall system provides separation between the funeral lounge and the kennel areas. The kennels are fully enclosed and an air-conditioning system provides both a comfortable environment and a barrier to reduce kennel noise. The air conditioning system also circulates clean fresh air into and around the kennel area.

The capital budget for the development of the crematorium and pound is around \$400,000 with additional fit-out costs.

Although we were provided with a beautiful natural bush site in which to build our facility, we were challenged by the inclusion and the expansion of a drainage sump placed directly beside the new building. The sump was installed to take storm water run-off from the roadway and the new works depot opposite. We were disappointed with this feature and clearly landscaping of the site has become an early priority.

ADVERTISING AND MARKETING THE SERVICE

Marketing and advertising the service is a vital component of success. It will require an initial marketing program followed by an ongoing commitment. A formal opening of the facility will be conducted following the establishment of some landscaping. We see opportunities to advertise the service in the following ways:

- television advertising, home, lifestyle and vet hospital shows;
- radio talkback;
- veterinarian practices;
- pet shops;
- animal owners and breeders associations;
- animal magazines; and
- circulation of brochures

FEES AND CHARGES

The fee scale for the service has not yet been finalised. However it is likely fees and charges will be set on the following services:

Transporting deceased animal
Transporting deceased animal after hours
Funeral Lounge service
After hour additional rate
Crematorium fee - including 1 hour use of Crematorium lounge
 Size (1)
 Size (2)
Collection of ashes
Placement of ashes in memorial niche wall including single plaque
Placement of ashes in garden of remembrance
Double plaque
Entry of Internet obituary

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank and acknowledge the following people who contributed to the development of this project. Mr Shane McGraw, Animal Memorial Cemetery and Crematorium, Birkshire Park, Mr Rodney Constantine, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, City of Stirling. Ms Fiona Strutt, Manager Administrative Services City of Stirling.

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Laurie is the Ranger Services Administrator with the City of Stirling WA. He has managed this section for the past five years. He had previously been involved with animal control since joining Stirling as an Assistant Pound keeper in 1986. Laurie has been instrumental in the development of a number of practices and procedures aimed at providing a fair, reasonable and balanced approach to issues associated with animal management and control.

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