



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT
AND CITY SERVICES**

(Reference: [Inquiry into the management of ACT cemeteries](#))

Members:

MS S ORR (Chair)
MR S DOSZPOT (Deputy Chair)
MS T CHEYNE
MR M PARTON

PROOF TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

MONDAY, 23 OCTOBER 2017

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Secretary to the committee:
Mr A Snedden (Ph: 620 50199)

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 2.02 pm.

BEER, MR STEPHEN, Managing Director, Norwood Park Ltd

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon, and welcome to the fourth hearing of the Standing Committee on Environment and Transport and City Services into the management of ACT cemeteries. The standing committee adopted this reference in July 2017 and will report its findings to the Legislative Assembly by the end of the year. The committee's terms of reference are on the committee website, and a copy is on the table of the committee room entrance. The committee has received 11 submissions in total, all of which are published and lodged on the committee's website. The committee invites feedback from interested persons on any of the issues raised by the submissions. The committee has already held three public hearings on the reference. The committee anticipates that this fourth hearing will be the final hearing on this reference. Today's hearing is public and is recorded by Hansard and accessible through the Assembly committees on demand webstreaming site.

Today I welcome Mr Stephen Beer, Managing Director of Norwood Park Ltd. Mr Beer, the privilege statement is on the pink card on the desk. Have you read and understood that.

Mr Beer: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Do you want to make an opening statement?

Mr Beer: Yes, thank you. Norwood Park Ltd is a non-listed public company with shareholders. It was founded in 1966, so that makes it now 51 years old. As I think everybody would know, it is situated in Mitchell. During its first year of operation it did 156 cremations and this year we have grown to where I believe we will be doing 2,000 cremations. Having said it is a non-listed public company, it comprises around 58 shareholders and 230,000 one-dollar shares.

THE CHAIR: Given that the crematorium operates separately to the publicly listed ones, can you outline for us how Norwood Park is covered by legislation and what requirements you have to adhere to?

Mr Beer: We are covered by the Cemeteries and Crematoria Act of 2003.

THE CHAIR: What provisions are in that that you need to—

Mr Beer: Provisions such as perpetual care for Norwood Park into the future, that sort of thing. We need to ensure that we do the maintenance schedule on all of our activities correctly. I am talking about our cremators, that sort of thing. That is basically what it is, complying with the Cemeteries and Crematoria Act of 2003.

THE CHAIR: Is there anything that requires that you provide a certain level of facility or a certain capacity, or is that up to the shareholders?

Mr Beer: No, there is not anything in there as far as I am aware.

MR PARTON: What do you call the main room?

Mr Beer: We call it the chapel.

MR PARTON: What is the capacity of that?

Mr Beer: Around 140, yes. We have done some alterations to it so we can increase the numbers. It was 120. It is only a minimal increase, but we have done some minor alterations to house an extra 20 or 30 seats.

MR PARTON: In a perfect world if you could wave a wand, would you make it bigger?

Mr Beer: We would love it to be bigger, yes.

MR PARTON: How big?

Mr Beer: We have had some plans drawn up. The board at this stage has not deliberated on that, but we would certainly like to double the capacity. In many of these situations there is an overflow area for the public, and we have an overflow area outside the chapel. Outside we have screens on the wall for families and people to watch the proceedings. That is an undercover area. But in an ideal world, yes, we would like it to be bigger.

MR PARTON: So if you were building one from scratch today in that location, how big would you make the chapel in terms of capacity?

Mr Beer: Probably 250 to 300. We have one of those in a different jurisdiction.

MR PARTON: That is the other question I was going to ask: how does your facility compare to others that could be comparable in other areas?

Mr Beer: Talking about the grounds, they are probably better than a lot. The chapel, as I said, is now 51 years old, and with anything that gets to that age you would always look to modifying it or increasing it et cetera. That is obviously a board issue, and the board will look at that into the future.

THE CHAIR: A number of the submissions we have received to the inquiry have made the case that another crematorium is required given the increase in demand for crematory services. What is your view on whether another crematorium would be required?

Mr Beer: My view goes along the lines of the government view; I think Canberra as it grows on the south side probably needs an additional facility. Several years ago I did a workshop with Deloitte where we looked at the feasibility of doing that but it was outside the realms of Norwood Park's budgeting.

THE CHAIR: Would that still be the case?

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Mr Beer: Yes, it would still be outside the realms of Norwood Park at this stage.

MR PARTON: So from a business perspective you have a monopoly now?

Mr Beer: Yes, we do have a monopoly. Everyone knows that.

MR PARTON: But you are saying you believe there should be a second crematorium?

Mr Beer: As I said, in line with the way the government is thinking, I would not disagree with that. I would agree with that.

MR PARTON: If there were a second crematorium, whether privately or publicly run, do you think it would have the potential to impact on your operation in a negative way but also perhaps change aspects of how your operation runs?

Mr Beer: It is a bit pie in the sky but we think it would probably alter it by 30 per cent, but we do not really know that. We would certainly get existing families coming to Norwood Park to be near loved ones et cetera.

MR PARTON: Of course.

Mr Beer: A lot of families are attached very much to Norwood Park, but I cannot be more specific than giving you that sort of percentage.

THE CHAIR: You did 156 cremations in your first year and 2,000 are expected this year?

Mr Beer: We have got a bit of time to go, obviously, but we think it will be 2,000.

THE CHAIR: That is obviously quite a jump up, even though it has been over a period of 50-plus years. Have you noticed an increase more recently or has this been a gradual increase?

Mr Beer: This year has shown an increase on 2016, yes.

THE CHAIR: So what was it in 2016?

Mr Beer: We did 1,828 in 2016-17 and in 2017-18 we believe it will be 2,000.

THE CHAIR: So you are seeing an increase in the demand for crematorium services each year?

Mr Beer: Yes.

MR PARTON: Is there a ceiling number? Is there a maximum? Do you at some stage reach capacity in the terms of the number of cremations you can do a year?

Mr Beer: Actual cremations?

MR PARTON: Yes.

Mr Beer: At this stage we do not have a problem with that at all. We are coping with it. We have got two cremators operating at any one time. I cannot see that that would be a problem into the future. We would have to determine just how many hours we would operate the things for during the day. It may have to go into the evening to finish cremations and that sort of thing.

MR PARTON: It was suggested to me by Father Wellspring that if you had someone who passed away today and you were booking a cremation at Norwood Park, depending on which week you did that, you could end up with a bit of a traffic jam, a bit of a backlog, and you may not be able to facilitate that for a number of days. Is that how things work at the moment?

Mr Beer: That would be determined by the funeral director, by taking on that workload and then booking it into Norwood Park. They obviously need to give us some lead time so we know where we are going with it, but at this stage that would be entirely up to the family and the funeral director to do that booking.

MR PARTON: I am hesitant to call it a “traffic jam” because we are talking about some sensitive issues.

THE CHAIR: I do not think Mark is talking about booking in for the ceremony but when the actual cremation happens after the funeral has been held. For instance, if you had a 10 am service that finishes at 11, does the body then go straight to cremation?

Mr Beer: Normally, yes, fairly quickly after the service. If there is any sign of a backlog we store the body appropriately in a cool room.

THE CHAIR: You said normally it goes straight to cremation. To give us a feel for the operating process, how often would you have to store bodies?

Mr Beer: I have to be careful the way I answer that. Not very often, to be honest. We can cremate 12 or 14 a day, depending on how long we operate the cremators for on that particular day. But if there is an overflow then we cool-room the bodies.

THE CHAIR: Going back to the question of whether there is a maximum, if you are doing 12 to 14 a day, there must be a maximum number of ceremonies you can do in one day?

Mr Beer: In terms of the chapel we can do five or six services a day, because they take about an hour by the time they come in and go. Then, of course, you have the direct deliveries that come where the service has been elsewhere at a church or a chapel and then they are direct delivered to the cremator at Norwood Park. In those cases there are no requirements for a family to book the chapel. That is what we call a direct delivery.

THE CHAIR: Okay. What proportion of the services do you do and how many would be direct deliveries?

Mr Beer: Five to three, I guess. I should qualify that: every day is different, to be honest. It is very hard to say, but that would be a ball park. There are five services and three directs today, but that can change.

MS CHEYNE: I apologise for my lateness; I was at another meeting. Would you bring me up to speed on what has been asked so I do not double up?

THE CHAIR: Yes. We had a bit of an overview of the park. It is a publicly listed company with 58 shareholders. It was established in 1966. It has gone from 156 cremations in its first year to 2,000 this year. As far as regulation goes, most of it goes to maintenance and upkeep of the area as opposed to what facilities should be provided. Please correct me, Mr Beer, if you disagree with me.

Mr Beer: Sorry, it is a bit hard to hear when you are not looking at me.

THE CHAIR: There was some suggestion that the board would like to alter the chapel facilities at some point and that that is a consideration the board is looking at.

Mr Beer: As I said earlier, I have had some plans drawn up, some ideas for an extension to the chapel. The board has not made any definite decisions on that at this stage.

THE CHAIR: We had a chat about the potential need for a second crematorium in view of the submissions we have received raising the question. Mr Beer said that within the context of the current discussion, he could see the case for a second crematorium in southern Canberra.

Mr Beer: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Hopefully that is it in a nutshell. Did you have any questions?

MS CHEYNE: I apologise if I repeat anything. I should refer to *Hansard*.

Mr Beer: That is fine.

MS CHEYNE: If you said that you appreciate the need or that it would be alright to have a crematorium or a cemetery in the southern part of Canberra—

Mr Beer: Yes.

MS CHEYNE: If there were a new crematorium as part of that, what impact would that have on the business of Norwood? Given that we are seeing that increasing demand, do you think there is enough demand to support two crematoria in Canberra?

Mr Beer: I sort of answered that just before you arrived. We think it would probably impact. I said earlier that it is pie in the sky but probably 30 per cent of our business would go to the southside. But we do not know that. Yes, it obviously would impact on Norwood Park's business model.

MS CHEYNE: How would that 30 per cent affect the viability of your operations? Would that involve staff loss?

Mr Beer: We would tailor our staff numbers accordingly, but we would have to suck it and see, just to see how that would pan out. I think that is the best way I can answer that. We have often had that discussion there that if something else did crop up, another crematorium, we would have to definitely look at the staffing levels.

MS CHEYNE: Did you just cover this before, Suzanne? Did you say that the focus of the business over the past few years has been more on the maintenance and the upkeep of Norwood rather than on the facilities that are provided there?

THE CHAIR: It was probably more it was covered in the legislation. They have to meet the requirements of—

MS CHEYNE: Okay.

THE CHAIR: Yes, but feel free to ask questions.

MS CHEYNE: What do you do as a business to make sure that that the community's expectations of facilities, atmosphere, ambience, for want of a better word, and sensitivity of cremation services meet the community's expectations?

Mr Beer: I do not quite understand what you mean.

MS CHEYNE: What do you do as a business? Do you get feedback from the community about the standard of the operation that you provide and do you tweak things that you offer as a result of that? What improvements have you made over the years to meet those expectations?

Mr Beer: We have done a lot of development around the park. Hence, a lot of families opt to have a garden service, particularly through these nicer months. We have currently somewhere about 1,500 to 1,800 memorials ready to go. That has happened in the past six months. We are continually developing the park. That brings me to mention that at some stage, if the committee had a chance, you could come out, meet with us there, do a walk around and have a look at the park to see how it has improved over the past seven, eight or 10 years, particularly in the past seven or eight years.

There has been a lot of development going on, a lot of plantings and, as I said, a lot of memorials on hand for families to view. It makes the job of our staff much easier to sell to families, because there is a bigger choice and there was not that there before.

THE CHAIR: I think most of the feedback we have had about the facilities has gone to the size of the chapel and the look of the chapel. Given that you have had some plans drawn up and you are looking at doing it, is there any indication you can give on how quickly those plans might progress? Will they be taken to an actual implementation stage?

Mr Beer: That would be something I would have to put to my board of directors and

we would work it through there. Yes, for sure.

THE CHAIR: How long ago did you get the plans drawn up?

Mr Beer: We had the plans done probably about 15 months ago.

THE CHAIR: It is relatively recent?

Mr Beer: Fairly well, yes.

MR PARTON: We had a fascinating discussion in here one day with a gentleman representing some Indian communities. He was talking about the cultural sensitivities and the cultural problems that are often experienced by people, I am sure not just in the cultural groups that he was representing but in some others, particularly in regards to cremations. I am sure everything that I am telling you is not new to you, that it is something you have been over on a number of occasions.

He was talking about the fact that in his country it would be the practice, I think, for the eldest daughter or son to physically start the fire that cremated the body, but that at Norwood Park, of course, that is not possible. Have you faced those sorts of problems? Have you had requests of that nature that you just could not meet?

Mr Beer: No, what happens in a lot of those cultures is that there is what we call a view charge. They actually come down and sit in a little room behind a glass partition. They can actually watch the coffin go in for the final thing. Some of them, particularly the Indian and Thai communities, like to book a view charge, yes. Not so much others.

MR PARTON: How big is the facility for that that you have just spoken of? How much capacity is there for that?

Mr Beer: About 20. It is for the immediate family. It basically was designed for the immediate family.

MR PARTON: How many of those requests would you get over a month?

Mr Beer: We would probably get four or five a month, I would imagine.

MS CHEYNE: Do you keep records of from how far afield people come to access your services?

Mr Beer: Absolutely, we do, yes. That is all done through the funeral directors. They do that. But they do come obviously a lot from Yass. There have been some from Young, some from Goulburn, but not a lot. There are a lot from the outskirts—obviously Queanbeyan and all around down there. Yes, they do come from reasonably far afield.

THE CHAIR: Is that because you are the only accessible crematorium in that area?

Mr Beer: Basically; Goulburn has one, but yes.

PROOF

MR PARTON: There is not one at Young?

Mr Beer: No, I do not think so, no.

THE CHAIR: And Queanbeyan does not have one then?

Mr Beer: No, they do not.

MR PARTON: No, they do not.

Mr Beer: No, they definitely do not have one.

MR PARTON: Can I bounce to something completely different?

THE CHAIR: Go for it.

MR PARTON: You talked about the fact that if another crematorium were set up in this town, particularly on the southside, it may get 30 per cent but it is hard to know. You said that you might have to restructure staff. How would you feel about that prospect if that crematorium were being run by the government, so that your business was being impacted by the ACT government that was offering the same service but just in a different geographic location?

Mr Beer: We would probably have no say in it, you know.

MR PARTON: No, I understand that. You can have a say in it here.

Mr Beer: We would much prefer that if something were to be set up on the southside we would be offered the opportunity to run it along the lines that we do at Norwood Park. But I think on the southside, from what I gleaned when I did the discussion with Deloitte, it was going to be a fairly grandiose type of situation and perhaps between 15 and 30 million, were the figures given to us.

That would be outside of Norwood Park's budget to actually set that up and do that. But then one of the questions in the box they gave me was: if we set it up, would Norwood Park be interested in running it? I ticked yes. We would be and I have heard no more.

THE CHAIR: When you say you ticked the box, is that a discussion you were having with the government or is that the discussion with Deloitte?

Mr Beer: I do not know who—I think government asked Deloitte to do a feasibility on it, I think from memory.

THE CHAIR: This is going back—

Mr Beer: That was several years ago.

THE CHAIR: I was going to say that this is going back a little while.

Mr Beer: Several years ago.

THE CHAIR: Several, yes.

Mr Beer: Yes, it was.

THE CHAIR: Mr Parton has put forward this idea of how you would feel about the government running the business. Would it actually make much difference whether it was the government or a private operator if it was just someone different from Norwood Park? Then it would all be much of a muchness if there was a second operator.

Mr Beer: I think Norwood Park has a great lot of experience in doing it. From an efficiency point of view, I think Norwood Park would do it very well. We do what we do out of Norwood Park at Mitchell very well; we do it very effectively and very efficiently. We do not overstaff it. We staff it correctly. I think that would be the case if we got an opportunity to look at the southside one.

THE CHAIR: I guess there are a few different scenarios. But in the scenario that Norwood Park was not the operator of the second park, would it make a difference who was running it, whether it was government, whether it was a second commercial business? Would it be much of a muchness, because it would just be a different operator?

Mr Beer: I do not want to get into the efficiencies of it but, no, it would not worry us. I do not think it would make much difference to us to be honest.

MS CHEYNE: I am trying to frame this question carefully. After a funeral service, do you have a questionnaire about how the immediate family or whoever found the quality of the service, the facilities provided and things like that—a direct way that people offer you feedback?

Mr Beer: Basically, we do not hand them out something to ask, “Do you give us a one or was it 10?”

MS CHEYNE: Yes, as you are walking out; like, here you go.

Mr Beer: We get the feedback through the funeral directors. We are not funeral directors.

MS CHEYNE: No, exactly.

Mr Beer: We get all that feedback through the funeral directors. The feedback we get is very positive. It has been very positive. You get some negative. I am not going to pretend you do not, but funeral directors in Canberra are very professional people. They do a wonderful job. Families give feedback to them and then they will come to see me if there is a problem or they feed it back to one of my staff, mainly my PA and office manager.

THE CHAIR: I think that pretty much covers all of our questions.

MR PARTON: That did not even hurt, did it?

Mr Beer: No, it did not hurt.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Beer, for your evidence. A *Hansard* transcript of the hearing will be sent to you soon for any edits or corrections. You have not have taken any questions on notice. *Hansard* for the hearing will be available on the website within the next week. The committee has now finished its public hearing program and will prepare its report for the Assembly.

Mr Beer: Thank you very much.

The committee adjourned at 2.30 pm.