City Cemeteries Face Gridlock

By MARC SANTORA

THOSE of us among the living all know New York City can be maddeningly expensive, whether one is shopping for a $40 million mansion on Fifth Avenue or a $2,500 studio walk-up in a former tenement on the Lower East Side.

For the dead, however, virtually no amount of money will secure a final resting place in the heart of a city that is fast running out of graveyard space.

And in the parts of town where a burial plot is still available, the cost has in some cases more than tripled in less than a decade; aboveground mausoleums can fetch upward of $3 million. Cemeteries are scrambling to create more space, and as plot prices have soared, the number of cremations has also risen, with a quarter of New Yorkers choosing the less expensive alternative.

Trinity Church Cemetery in Washington Heights, the last operating graveyard in Manhattan, has stopped selling plots, offering burial only in the most “extraordinary circumstances,” or to people with long-held reservations.

The largest Jewish graveyard in Brooklyn, Washington Cemetery, ran out of land in the winter after tearing up roads and pathways to utilize every cubic inch of ground. Evergreens and Cypress Hills, also in Brooklyn, may sprawl, but not enough, and dozens of smaller cemeteries spread across the five boroughs are squeezed, too. The city’s largest Catholic cemetery, Calvary in Queens, is close to capacity. And even the most famous of them all, Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, has only about five more years before it will be forced to stop selling plots.

More than 50 years have passed since a major cemetery was established within the city, and no new burial grounds are planned. But New Yorkers continue to die, some 60,000 a year.

Accordingly, per square foot, burial plots in centrally located cemeteries rival the most expensive real estate in the city. A private mausoleum at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx can easily cost more than $1,000 per square foot.
“We have people who would like to disinter Mom and Dad and sell the graves back to make some money,” said Richard Fishman, the director of the New York State Division of Cemeteries.

There are state laws limiting the profits on resold graves, but the fact that people would be willing to go to such lengths, Mr. Fishman said, illustrates just how valuable burial plots have become.

“There is a serious shrinkage in the available grave space,” Mr. Fishman said. “How many years out for each individual cemetery depends on a number of factors, but space is definitely tight.”

Other major urban areas have taken measures to alleviate similar space crunches. London allows people to be buried upright, while cemeteries in Singapore and Sydney, among others, offer “limited tenure,” cemetery-speak for digging up bodies after a certain amount of time so that the plot can be reused.

New York City is not now contemplating graveyard evictions, although the state did pass a law several years ago that allows cemeteries to take over empty plots bought more than 75 years ago if the owner cannot be reached. Maple Grove in Queens has already reclaimed more than 150 graves, and many other cemeteries are taking similar action, state officials said.

In fact, cemetery operators have begun to resort to the kind of creative use of space that many a Manhattan landlord might envy — squeezing coffins into every barren inch, narrowing paths, stacking coffins nine-deep.

“We are apparently one of the first that ran out of burial space,” said Dominick Tarantino, who runs Washington Cemetery in Brooklyn, “but the other ones, I don’t think they are too far behind me.”

From his office, the rumble of the F train can be heard as it slices through the graveyard. Look in any direction from the elevated platform at the Bay Parkway stop, and the crowding is evident, with graves pushing up against auto-body shops, apartment buildings and busy intersections. The paths are just wide enough for a golf cart; the old roads were sacrificed to tombstones. Coffins have to be unloaded from hearses outside the gate.

“We have had bribes offered, sure,” Mr. Tarantino said. “But we have nothing to be bribed for. We have no room.”

Just as the architecture on a city street reveals the history of the time, so do the headstones in the graveyard, which was established in 1841. There are the extravagant monuments favored in the
1920s, reminders of the boom before the Depression. Tiny white sandstone markers — the “baby graves,” as the head groundskeeper, Charlie Anderson, calls them — pop up in clusters, their fading dates coinciding with various epidemics.

On newer headstones, almost uniformly made of black marble, etched portraits of the deceased stare out at visitors. This is the style favored by the Russian Jews from neighboring Brighton Beach, who have been pleading for more room to bury their dead.

The cemetery has made a bid on an adjacent house. Even though the owner is asking a hefty sum — $1.4 million, down from $1.8 million — for a small house that sits on less than an acre of land, it makes economic sense for the cemetery to buy it.

But before Washington acquires more turf, Mr. Tarantino has quite a few bureaucratic hurdles to clear, including securing the approval of the City Council.

“The city does not make it too easy for us to buy land for cemetery use,” he said one recent afternoon before heading off to meet with political leaders. If the cemetery does get the property, there is little doubt the plots will go quickly.

“Even if he could only make 400 new plots, they would sell in a week,” said Mr. Fishman of the Division of Cemeteries.

The price for a plot before the cemetery ran out of them was $12,000. New plots would very likely be even more expensive.

“Any little piece of land, we are really getting a premium for,” Mr. Tarantino said. And when he says little piece of land, he means that literally.

Despite the bulging waistlines that have necessitated bigger casket sizes across the country, Washington Cemetery is strict: no caskets more than 26 inches wide.

“They got to squeeze them into the box,” Mr. Anderson said.

The plots themselves are 30 inches wide, 7 feet long and 6 feet deep. They are so close to one another that as workers prepared a site for a burial earlier this month, they had to make sure that the coffins buried in neighboring plots did not tumble into the new grave.

It might seem that an enterprising developer could find a way to make a lucrative business out of providing burial space.
But that has not happened.

First, by law, cemeteries in New York State must be nonprofit institutions. There are 35 privately owned cemeteries in the city and several dozen with religious affiliations. The closer to Manhattan and major transportation, the more crowded and expensive a burial ground will be. Farther away, particularly in Staten Island and parts of the Bronx, space is available. The indigent of New York City are buried on Hart Island in Long Island Sound.

Woodlawn, which was part of Westchester County when it was founded in 1863 but was later incorporated into the Bronx, still has burial room. It hopes to be able to offer graves for another 40 to 50 years, but that relative abundance hasn’t kept its prices down.

“We want to have enough saved so that the income from the trust, once we are closed and have nothing left to sell, is enough to maintain the cemetery,” said John P. Toale Jr., the president of Woodlawn.

While there is a space crunch in the city, there is more space in the suburbs, and cemeteries in upstate New York can barely give away plots, state officials said. Many New Yorkers who struggled and saved to live in the city end up buried elsewhere.

Even as the broader real estate market languished in the recession, prices for graves in the city continued skyward. The state regulates the fees a cemetery can charge for services like excavation, but graves sell at market price. So burial plots are a cemetery’s revenue-generator.

However, the trust funds set up by cemeteries to provide income for operating costs have taken a hit, just as other institutional investments have. The number of people buying graves as part of estate planning has also dropped significantly, cemetery officials said. One reason for the decline is that 25 percent of all those who die in the city are opting to be cremated, up from 10 percent a little over a decade ago.

Prices vary from cemetery to cemetery. At land-rich Woodlawn, a single-depth grave for one starts at $6,995. A double-depth plot begins at $7,995, and a family plot ranges from $64,995 to $1.575 million.

At Green-Wood, the sprawling cemetery in Brooklyn, space is harder to come by, and entry-level prices for in-ground burial reflect this, starting at $11,000.

At Trinity’s graveyard in Washington Heights, in-ground plots are sold only in extraordinary
circumstances, as when former Mayor Edward I. Koch asked that a special Jewish enclave be created in the Episcopal cemetery so that he could be laid to rest in the heart of the city he once ran. He paid $20,000 for the privilege.

Like other cemeteries short on space, Trinity has resorted to aboveground crypts, which start at $9,000.

Now that an end to plot sales is in sight, Green-Wood is seeking to transform its image, according to Richard J. Moylan, its president. The graveyard charges admission for guided tours, giving people a chance to saunter through time among the tombstones of the notable and the notorious. The hope is that it will become much like Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, a magnet for tourists.

For now, though, most city cemeteries are not so much concerned with drawing the living as finding room for the dead.

And as is true in all real estate, it’s about location. Just as the apartment-hunter pays more to be near a park or to secure a sweeping view, the address within the cemetery often affects the price tag.

Being buried under a tree is more desirable than being out in the open. A plot that is easy to get to can be more valuable than one in the back 40. A neighborhood of ornate Victorian marble can cost more than an avenue of flat, mowable markers. And then there are the specific needs and wants of different cultural groups.

For instance, many Asians prefer to be buried on hilltops.

“The Chinese especially, they will literally buy the whole mountaintop,” Mr. Fishman said. “They would pay a fortune for that.”

Even a fortune, however, cannot buy a hilltop once there are no more hilltops to be bought.