

Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal  
PO Box K35  
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To whom it may concern

**Response to draft IPART Review of the Costs and Pricing of Interment in NSW.**

Thank you for providing the opportunity to make a submission regarding IPART's draft report on interment costs in NSW.

I am the director of a Sydney architectural practice and a specialist in the area of cemetery design. My prior and ongoing consultancy work for two NSW Crown land managers has given me insight into the issues raised in IPART's draft report, as has my current role as an appointed member of CCNSW's Community and Consumer Consultative Group.

I concur with many of the findings stated in the draft report, particularly:

*The perpetual nature of cemeteries, and the mismatch between revenue and cost streams, creates a risk that cemetery operators will not have enough funds to continue to maintain cemeteries once all interment rights have been sold. (p2)*

However, in my expert opinion, there are major flaws in how the issue of perpetual maintenance has been understood by IPART and addressed in its recommendations, as captured in this objective:

*To ensure cemeteries and gravesites are maintained forever, strengthening the requirements for cemetery operators to set aside funds to care for them once all interment rights have been sold. (p2)*

The acquisition of new interment land to fund unlimited interment maintenance costs is akin to using a credit card to pay off a loan. Ultimately, an increased debt must be paid. Rather than attempt to enforce an inefficient and impractical model based on continual growth, acquisition of large areas of highly-sought-after urban land, and endless upkeep, the NSW Government should be actively looking to ease the requirement for perpetual maintenance in existing cemeteries, and should develop design standards for new interment spaces that significantly reduce ongoing maintenance liabilities.

At present, Crown land managers operate with a business model largely dependant on acquiring and releasing new land to offset maintenance costs. This means that the requirement for perpetual maintenance cannot be met without provision of an equivalent scheme for the supply of land appropriate for interment. But land managers have largely failed to secure viable properties due to competition from other public and private uses and interests. Even if such land were made available, given that the total legacy costs of NSW cemeteries already exceed \$1.7 billion, an increase in land will only increase proportionate liability.

If I understand the draft report correctly, the interment service levy is to be set as a percentage of revenue. Many smaller cemeteries without additional burial space available will be unable to make a contribution, and hence will have no funds set aside for perpetual maintenance.

Moreover, the recommendation that 'all licensed operators be required to provide a basic adult lawn interment right and burial, at a minimum standard of maintenance as specified by the Code of Practice' promises to perpetuate maintenance problems. Lawn burial is a mode of interment that contributes significant maintenance costs over time due to the need to mow, water, weed and repair lawns, fix listing headstones and rectify cracking paths. Requiring every cemetery to provide a standard lawn burial offering will only intensify the larger problem. Lawn burial should instead be phased out over time, in favour of landscape burial approaches that minimise ongoing maintenance.

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IPART's draft report justifies the strategy of continual growth and land acquisition by stating that 'it is unlikely there will be an increase in renewable tenure without changes to the current arrangements.' Indeed, at present those who do not opt for traditional burial, or cannot afford it, often choose carbon-intensive cremation.

However, as IPART is aware, some existing graves can be reused to provide additional interments for family members, thus providing a source of revenue that does not depend on new land, with reduced infrastructural costs. The number of graves available for this purpose, and the predicted frequency of this revenue stream, should be calculated to help determine the extent of new land required. Of course, if cemetery operators are encouraged to continue seeking additional burial land in order to meet existing and ongoing maintenance costs, there will be little incentive for these operators to genuinely innovate and create renewable tenure interment options that are more palatable to the wider community and specific cultural groups. Instead, more land will be needlessly exhausted to sustain outmoded practices.

Cemeteries operate on centuries-long timeframes that mock the very notion of perpetuity. I can think of very few successful examples of cemetery preservation in NSW or Australia-wide. Even in the most historically significant cemeteries, individual graves are the rights holder's responsibility and eventually fall into ruin. Buried-out areas fill with weeds and pathways crumble.

Contrary to assertions made in IPART's report, while cemetery maintenance may decrease in frequency over time, rectification and repair costs increase as masonry structures succumb to age, root damage and vandalism. I believe that is wrong to assume that perpetual maintenance will present anything but an endless source of expenses.

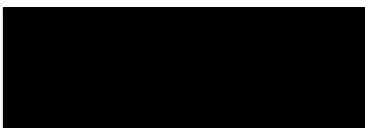
There are other approaches to upkeep of cemetery lands that should be considered on a case-by-case basis, including planting-out, re-levelling or re-landscaping of existing cemetery spaces to provide low-maintenance, drought-resilient areas. Such approaches can preserve memorials in place while greatly reducing maintenance costs, and can result in attractive spaces that retain rainwater and provide improved habitat for flora and fauna.

There are also many former cemeteries in NSW, including Pioneers Memorial Park in Leichhardt, St Thomas Rest Park in Cammeray, and Camperdown Memorial Rest Park in Newtown, that might demonstrate how historic cemeteries have been radically altered to create public parks while retaining a memorial function, transforming potential liabilities into community assets.

**In summary, the answers to the predicament of high burial costs and lack of land are quite straightforward: perpetual maintenance should be phased out in favour of lower-maintenance, lower-cost approaches, and cemetery operators should be strongly encouraged to reuse their existing spaces rather than occupy new ones.**

Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require any assistance or clarification of the above.

Sincerely



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