

Crematorium foes speak up at hearing

By Ryan Anderson
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Dogs may be man's best friend, but the thought of Fido's final resting place being located in their backyards has some Friendswood and Pearland residents a little hot under the collar.

Around 400 residents voiced their concerns over a proposed pet crematorium at a public hearing Thursday night at Rustic Oaks Elementary in Pearland.

The meeting was held in response to an application for a Texas Natural Resource and Conservation Commission Air Pollution Permit filed by Crespo Family Services to build All God's Creatures Pet Cremation Center and Memorial Gardens on County Road 127 near Clover Field and the Friendswood/Pearland border.

Representatives of the TNRCC and Crespo Family Services were on hand to address residents' concerns over the proposed facility.

The multi-stage development will include a library and training facility for families and veterinarians, a Court of Honor for service animals who have died, picnic pavilions, nature trails, land for horse burial and a crematorium.

"We hope this will be as nice as any park in the area. We hope families will have picnics on our grounds and hike on our trails as they remember their pets," L. Anthony Crespo, president of Crespo Family Services said.

The central concerns residents expressed during the three-hour meeting involved fears of decreased property values in the area surrounding the proposed facility and decreased air quality as a result of the burning of animal remains.

"I think that Crespo should find an area that is more industrial than residential," said area resident Regina Cowen. "Usually, cemeteries are located away from everything else, not in the heart of a residential neighborhood."

Crespo addressed residents' concerns regarding the property being located in a residential area by producing a document that showed that the property would be zoned industrial were it to be annexed by the city.

After several residents exchanged volleys with Crespo regarding the validity of the letter and its claims regarding the property being zoned industrial, TNRCC officials tabled the issue citing lack of jurisdiction over zoning issues.

Currently, the property lies within the extra territorial jurisdiction of Pearland.

Another popular sentiment expressed by residents during the formal comment stage of the meeting, was a feeling of being powerless to stop the permit application.

"I am very concerned that TNRCC will approve the permit request regardless of what the residents feel," said Heather Maples.

TNRCC staff lawyer, Lisa McClain addressed Maples' and other's concerns by stating that although the majority of the TNRCC's decision regarding approving the permit would center around air quality standards being met, resident feelings would be taken into account, to a certain degree, as well.

During the formal comment period, many residents produced statistics relating to the harmful effects of exposure to chemicals, such as those released during the animal cremation process.

According to the TNRCC, residents' fears regarding toxins in the air are unfounded.

"Levels of toxins released by pet crematories are infinitely less than what would cause any substantial health risks," said Todd Galiga, TNRCC toxicologist. "The emissions produced by this facility should not greatly add to decreasing the overall air quality of the area."

The animal cremation retort which will be used at the site, should the permit get approved, is the BLP model 500/150 which is manufactured by B&L Cremation Systems, Inc.

The retort, consisting of two chambers, uses natural gas to fuel a fire which reaches 1,600 degrees during the cremation process.

The animals remains are located in the primary chamber.

The secondary chamber breaks down leftover gases into water vapor, nitrogen and carbon dioxide.

The retort can incinerate 100 pounds an hour.

"There is no odor or visible smoke during the cremation process," Crespo said. "This is a clean, state-of-the-art machine designed to cremate pets. It is more advanced than many machines designed for human cremation. There is no big smoke stack belching black smoke."

To insure proper working order, the unit would be serviced monthly by workers at the crematory and annually by the manufacturer.

Should a problem arise during the cremation process, such as loss of power, or toxic gas release, the unit would shut down, according to Crespo.

"There is no danger to the public," Crespo said. "All of the danger would be limited to inside the retort."

The crematorium would be housed in a windowless, metal building and would be "virtually trespasser proof," according to Crespo.

Additionally, the property would be surrounded by fencing to minimize any potential risk to area residents and prevent children from getting into areas on the grounds where they could get hurt.

Other residents voiced concern that the Crespos could convert to performing human or medical waste cremations were a permit to be issued.

According to the TNRCC, those fears are also unfounded.

"The permit, if issued, would be very specific. If the Crespos decided they wanted to cremate other items they would need to go through the permit process all over again," said David Ferrell, TNRCC engineer.

While there was no visible support for the facility at the meeting, Crespo said that market research, commissioned by Crespo Family Services, showed that there was a need for the facility to be built.

"Research conducted by the University of Houston showed an overwhelming support for a facility such as this in the area," Crespo said. "We felt that it was very important to provide prompt, professional service to an area that is currently in need of a facility such as ours."

Other allies of the proposed facility, according to Crespo, are members of the local veterinarian community.

"Local veterinarians have been very supportive of us, due to lack of resources in the area," Crespo said.

Thursday's meeting was the first of many stages which must be completed before the permit application can be approved.

The final decision regarding approval of the permit rests with the TNRCC Board of Directors.

Residents wishing to view the permit application can go to the Pearland Public Library.

For more information on the status of the application, or to voice their views, residents can contact the TNRCC office 1-800-687-4040.