



May 11, 2020

**PRESS RELEASE: Protecting Birch Hill Part 1**

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**Fairbanks, Alaska** – There are two actions that have caused damage to graves within the Alaska Native section of the Birch Hill Cemetery. I would like to clarify recent news reports about the damage.

Vandals caused damage to at least eight graves. We have photos for most. Another nine graves were damaged by snow melt runoff, from our estimation.

Birch Hill has a history of run off damage, even before we took over the eight acres of the Native cemetery over 10 years ago. In April, we alerted our members that the road into the cemetery was nearly impassable because runoff caused huge cracks and muck. It is a normal spring occurrence.

But on May 3, I received reports from families that graves had been vandalized. I went up to the cemetery several times and saw the vandalism for myself. This is the second serious human-caused breach of our cemetery in recent years.

By then most of the snow had melted, but it was clear to me which graves were vandalized and which were damaged by snow melt. I was heartbroken by the vandalism.

Both Jessica Black, FNA board president, and I felt that we needed to express our sympathies and apologies to our membership via social media about the vandalism. We did that on Monday, May 4, saying there was extensive and widespread vandalism damage at the cemetery.

I understand that two families also called the Fairbanks Police Department on May 3, as well. Two officers responded but did not find anyone to speak to at Birch Hill. They noted the obvious damage from runoff.

On May 5, Lt. Greg Foster, of FPD, asked me to meet him at the cemetery to review damage. Several others were in attendance, including one of the initial responding officers, a city engineer and FNA's maintenance director, Eric Fitzgerald. All of the vandalism had been cleaned up by then, either by families or our maintenance crew. Lt. Foster acknowledged that the vandalism had been repaired by the time he got there.

We discussed future plans with the cemetery, including hydro seeding a section of the hill heavily damaged by the snow melt. We have been operating the Native section of Birch Hill since for over a decade, without a meaningful budget. It had been going well, but the vandalism has given urgency to



send a five phase plan forward to our board of directors to consider. The plan includes building a private road into the cemetery and putting up a fence.

Lt. Foster said that routine police patrols could be hampered by other police calls and staff shortages, so we at FNA are exploring ways to provide better security.

FNA staff and board of directors are looking for solutions to mitigate runoff damage and halt vandalism. This will take money, and now we are tasked with finding ways to provide the appropriate funding to take care of our community cemetery.

The Fairbanks Police Department have noted only two graves were vandalized, while our count is eight. If anyone has information about grave vandalism they are urged to call Officer Phil James at 907- 450-6481, or FPD's main number, 907-450-6500, about FPD Case# 20-1502.