

Snow tampers with timing of last goodbyes

By Matt Chittum | The Roanoke Times | Posted: Friday, February 14, 2014 8:26 pm

Death doesn't ditch its Toyota on the side of the road when it snows. Death keeps right on rolling.

For those in the business of bringing a dignified final curtain to those whom death has found, though, the kind of snow the region has seen this week is a problem.

"We're just continuing to go to the hospitals and nursing homes and homes to bring people back into our care," said Sammy Oakey, president of Oakey's Funeral Service and Crematory in Roanoke.

But that's where the process of laying the dead to rest hits a bottleneck.

"We're caught in this situation where, number one, the families can't come in to make the arrangements. Then, even the ones that can come in ... we can't get into the cemeteries."

With the snow that's piled up, six feet under becomes eight feet under, and that makes the work of opening graves and making them presentable a problem.

"We've got to get our roads plowed and get a pathway to the graves," said Don Wilson, president of Evergreen Memorial Trust, which operates Roanoke's Evergreen Burial Park, Mountain View Cemetery in Vinton and Mountain View Memorial Park in Boones Mill. "Then you've got to get the equipment in, and not just dig the grave, but backfill the grave. It's a mess."

For Wilson, however, the same bad conditions that are causing problems are giving his staff time to catch up. If families can't get to funerals, they have a chance to plow roads and open graves.

They can even use snow blowers to clear snow from an area and put down tarps and erect tents for a graveside service if necessary, he said.

In fact, a funeral scheduled for Friday at Mountain View Cemetery in Vinton was going on as planned, Wilson said.

But generally, funeral homes like Oakey's are left to care for the deceased until the families can gather for the service. Oakey stressed that the situation isn't dire.

"We have plenty of room here, both in our environmentally cooled areas, or for people who are already embalmed," he said.

But once the snow melts, there's another problem — scheduling the backlog of funerals.

"When things do finally clear off, we've got limited capacity," Oakey said. "We can't do 15 funerals a day." That means some families may have to wait longer still.

In some cases, the family can opt to hold the funeral service, but inter the body later on. Wilson said Evergreen can temporarily place a casket in its mausoleum until a burial can be arranged.

“It’s a delicate thing. You really feel for the families,” he said. “They’ve lost someone and it has to be postponed because nobody can get to the funeral if they wanted to.”