

Speech by Chair of the Board at Community Information Session –
27/04/2023

Good evening everyone, and thank you for joining us this evening.

On behalf of the RPCV Board I want to apologise to you for the loss and hurt caused by the confusion around the RPCV Adornment Policy in December and the actions of RPCV in January.

While Board members were shocked and appalled by the removal and disposal of adornments our dismay cannot be compared to the pain that you are experiencing.

Those adornments, which are alive with the memories of loved ones, were mistreated as disposable things to be thrown away. For this reason we particularly apologise for the actions which displayed no regard for the memory of the loved ones that you hold most dear.

All of us in this room know that the memory of departed loved ones is precious, and so we all understand that the clearing of adornments without proper consultation, notice or storage should not have happened and must never happen again.

Each of you will have your opinion about what the Board should have done and should do, however for the Board accepting responsibility for the actions of RPCV means working to understand what happened and ensuring that it cannot and does not happen again.

Many of you have queried the role of the Board and asked why there appeared to have been a change in policy in December, why adornments were removed from memorials in January and why the Board seemingly acted so slowly in response.

As you are aware the role of a Board is governance, that is setting the directions for the organisation, including through the Strategic Plan and various policies. The Board employs a Chief Executive Officer who has the responsibility of implementing the strategic directions and policies of the Board through the day to day management of RPCV operations and reports to the Chair and the Board.

The first indication to me that there was confusion about the RPCV adornments policy was on Boxing Day when I had a conversation about the policy with a local journalist. I asked the RPCV Interim CEO to respond to the journalist's questions which resulted in an article in the local media. As a result of these conversations I became aware that management had concerns regarding health and safety and the scale of some memorials in the lawn sections of the Bendigo Cemetery and I shared this information with Board members.

It has been both a concern and embarrassment to me to acknowledge that I was not aware of the enforcement actions that RPCV undertook at Eaglehawk Cemetery in January until I saw social media posts, and over the weekend of 21 and 22 January, received phone calls from family and friends who had had items removed from memorials at the Eaglehawk Cemetery.

It was at this point that I became aware of the nature and depth of the inappropriate actions being taken to clear adornments from memorials and the distress that these actions were causing in the community.

Over the following week it became clear to me that the priorities of the Board and the Interim CEO were not in alignment. The Interim CEO has since resigned from her employment with RPCV.

In order to understand what had happened in the preceding weeks the Board requested Mr Lucas Robertson, who holds the position of Chief of People and Governance at Southern Metropolitan Cemetery Trust, to undertake an independent investigation into the events to give the Board an understanding of how and why the situation had occurred and, most importantly, to provide recommendations so that this cannot happen again.

Mr Robertson is with us this evening and will shortly speak to you about his report, it's findings and recommendations. I will speak to you about the Boards responses to the recommendations after Mr Robertson has addressed you.

Other actions taken by the Board in February included appointing Acting CEO Maureen O'Keefe on a short term basis while a recruitment process for a permanent CEO is undertaken. This process is underway with the CEO position currently being advertised.

One of the actions Ms O'Keefe was tasked with was to undertake a series of community engagement meetings to hear first hand from people who had been directly impacted by the actions of RPCV in January.

These meetings enabled about 18 families to put on record the hurt and loss to them.

The constructive and thoughtful manner in which these people used this opportunity to tell their unique stories is deeply appreciated by the Board. I would like to thank all the participants for the many useful and positive ideas expressed for improvements, especially improvements which will link the community closer to RPCV.

The account of the community engagement meetings was provided to Mr Robertson for consideration in his investigation and has been forwarded along with his report to the Department of Health, the Minister for Health and the Victorian Ombudsman

Other actions that the Board has undertaken have included arranging for grief counseling sessions for community members effected by the actions, responding to complaints lodged with the Ombudsman's Office and addressing the health, safety and well-being of RPCV staff.

Throughout this period our staff have been working in a high pressure situation with a significant increase in phone calls, emails and in-person complaints and enquiries. The Board acknowledges and thanks our staff for their work under the high levels of stress that the situation generated. The Board also apologizes to people who have had difficulties when they have tried to contact RPCV during this time.

I will speak to you further about other proposed actions following Mr Robertson's presentation of his recommendations.

Before handing over to Mr Robertson I want to again express the Boards sorrow for the loss and hurt caused by the actions of RPCV.

Mr. Robertson presented his report at the information session.

RPCV response to Report and recommendations.

Thank you Lucas for the work that you have put into this investigation and report and for joining us tonight to present it to the community.

I would also like to thank the staff and community members who have contributed so frankly to a difficult and deeply personal discussion.

Due to the very personal and private communications that form the basis of the report the Board requests that you will respect the decision not to publish the report. This position is supported by legal advice. Instead the board decided to hold this community meeting to present the findings and most importantly, to set out the plans and actions for the future.

None of us, in this room or in our community, want to have a repeat of the events of January, we need to work together to resolve the concerns that have been the basis for the situation that has occurred.

We believe the key to a solution lies in a closer relationship between RPCV and the communities it serves.

We have heard your voices and we have received and accept all the recommendations of the report. The terrible series of events has shown us how much the community values our local cemeteries and the report has set out the actions and steps that we need to take to ensure there is not repeat of this or a similar situation.

I would now like to respond briefly to each of the 12 recommendations and am happy to take questions on the way forward at the end of my comments..

Recommendation 1

A review of the Adornment Policy.

A review of the Adornment policy will be undertaken after the new permanent CEO is appointed as they will be the person responsible for working in conjunction with staff and the community to implement the revised policy.

At the start of February the Board announced that the harsh implementation of the Adornment policy would cease and the only items removed would be those that presented health and safety risks, that is, alcohol, objects with metal spikes or sharp edges, broken objects and glass objects and if a glass object contains flowers it will be replaced

with a plastic container. Until the review of the Adornment policy is completed this position will be maintained.

Recommendation 2

Ongoing consultation processes with community members to inform the Adornment Policy, communications to Rights of Interment Holders, and improve the community understanding of RPCV operations.

The review of the Adornment policy will be part of a broad based, community wide, consultation about our cemeteries now and in the future and include consideration of changing cultural practices, types of interments and memorialisation and on-going community consultation and feedback process. This community consultation will take place in the second half of this year.

A review of notification processes regarding notification to ROHI is underway and work is being done to transition historical data to digital format.

Recommendation 3

Develop volunteering initiatives to strengthen knowledge and relationships between RPCV and it's communities. Including implementing current plans to reinstate volunteer activities and expanding the number of community events conducted by RPCV.

RPCV suspended volunteer activity in 2019 and the number of community events has dropped to one or two per year, in part due to the pandemic.

Last year the Board developed a new Strategic Plan which refocused on the involvement of volunteers and community groups.

This includes plans to establish 'Friends of' groups around each cemetery where the community wishes to be involved.

The first of these will be the 'Friends of EagleHawk Cemetery'
Our Acting CEO Maureen O'Keefe will commence discussions with interested community members shortly.

The number of community events held each year will be increased to at least 10 per year. To assist with these community and volunteer activities RPCV will need to expand its staff to include a community engagement officer. This appointment will take place under the permanent CEO.

Recommendation 4

Procedures for handling customer sales, queries and complaints.

The Acting CEO has commenced a review of the procedures for handling customer sales, queries and complaints and has revised staff roles and training.

Recommendation 5

A review of media, social media and marketing policies and practices.

Management is currently giving consideration to this, and the resources required, including training and additional staffing allocations, this will be on-going under the permanent CEO.

Recommendation 6

Communications planning and processes, templates and training to enable timely delivery of messaging with consistency and clarity.

The Acting CEO has implemented a fortnightly staff newsletter in April and created a staff Customer Services Committee to proactively identify, review and address issues, including communications, fact sheets, procedures and systems.

As part of this work, RPCV will also examine ways on how to strengthen communication with the community.

Recommendation 7

Establish a crisis management policy.

This will be undertaken by the CEO and the Audit & Risk Committee.

Recommendation 8

Create a workplace culture that will best serve RPCV and its community and aligning business operations and decision making with the Vision, Values and Mission statement.

The new Strategic Plan was finalised in late 2022 and the Board initiated a review of its Governance Charter to align it with the Strategic Plan and the Acting CEO is currently working with staff to align their work processes and procedures with the 2022 Strategic Plan.

Recommendation 9

Establishing a psychologically safe environment for staff.

The Acting CEO has partnered with EmploySure to provide HR and OS support to RPCV including provision of policies, procedures, systems, audits, regulatory compliance and frontline support for staff.

Recommendation 10

Induction processes for new staff and Trust members.

EmploySure will assist with developing on-boarding and induction packages for both staff and new Trust members,

Recommendation 11

A governance review consistent with the Act and with professional assistance.

The Board established a governance review in November 2022 to align the Governance Charter with the new Strategic Plan. A workshop and planning day is being held on 29 April with support from the Institute of Community Directors Australia.

Roles and responsibilities of the Board, CEO and Chairperson will form part of this review as will reporting timelines to the Board and communications and contact between staff and the Board.

The Community Advisory Committee role was reviewed in 2022.

A skills matrix is maintained and has informed the recent round of Trust appointments.

The Trust undertakes annual performance reviews, with the 2023 review scheduled for the second half of this year, while the Trust undertakes annual performance reviews of the CEO.

Recommendation 12

Develop a documented plan for investment in facilities and resources required over the longer term.

As a result of the Strategic Planning process in 2022 an Infrastructure and Transformation Committee was established. This committee will develop a master planning process for all RPCV cemeteries in line with the strategic plan.

In summary:

- RPCV will be reviewing the Adornment policy and conducting a community consultation about our cemeteries now and in the future;
- we will be developing opportunities for community members as volunteers at our cemeteries and participants at events, including establishing a “Friends of Eaglehawk Cemetery”;
- we are and will continue to review and revise our communications processes and procedures both internally and with the community;
- we have commenced aligning our workplace culture with our vision, values and mission as well as ensuring that staff have a safe workplace;
- we are in the process of undertaking a governance review to align our Governance Charter with our new strategic plan, this has included reviewing our Community Advisory Committee and establishing an Infrastructure and Transformation Committee.

Some of the changes can and will be implemented more quickly than others, other changes will take time to filter through the organisation and become part of our business as usual processes.

While the changes are taking place, we will continue to keep the community informed.

Before handing back to our meeting facilitator for questions I would like to close by thanking all of those people who have been affected by this dreadful situation for voicing your complaints and suggestions.

We have heard your voices.

The Board looks forward to working with members of our community and our staff to implement these changes in policy and practice to ensure that we have respectful and beautiful places of remembrance to share with our communities.