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Nine-month limit suggested for roadside tributes

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Roadside memorials should generally be allowed to remain in place for nine months, as long they're not a safety hazard and not on roads with speed limits of 70 km/h or more, say guidelines drafted by the city.

The city has also come up with a memorial of its own, suggesting metal bands on street lights as a less-obtrusive way to remembering someone who's died.

The guidelines, written up after a public survey and safety study, are meant to balance people's desire to mark a loved one's death with public safety and keeping streets clear.

They came after Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart asked city staff to explore ways to deal with the memorials and will be heading before a city committee next week.

Troy McLeod, the city's manager of traffic engineering, said the city picked a nine-month timeline for the memorials because removing them at the one-year mark, on the anniversary of a loved one's death, wasn't the best move.

"Six months seemed too short, a year seemed insensitive, and beyond a year seemed too long, so we settled on nine months," McLeod said.

It's not a hard-and-fast rule, he added, saying some could be moved earlier if they were causing safety problems, while others could be left in place longer if the family wanted. Nothing would be removed without talking to the family first, he said.

As for the 70 km/h threshold, McLeod said roads over that speed limit aren't designed to have people pull over, which they would be doing if they were placing a memorial.

A survey of 810 drivers by a University of Calgary researcher found more than 60 per cent of people backed the idea of allowing roadside memorials, but half of them wanted some kind of time limit imposed.

The city also talked to families who had used memorials before it crafted the guidelines, McLeod said.

Colley-Urquhart said she is happy with the report's suggestions, adding the nine-month timeline is a good general rule.

"The mourning of a lost loved one goes on for a lifetime," she said. "(But) this is an average of what would be reasonable for the immediate loss."

Calgary police said they would support any initiative that would balance the needs of families with safety.

"A decision like this will allow family members and loved ones to express their grief

and allow a healing process, but will allow these intersections and signage to get back to normal again," said spokesman Kevin Brookwell.

Signs, bunches of flowers and other items left at death scenes are eye-catching and therefore pose a danger to drivers and pedestrians, according to Alberta Motor Association spokesman Ken Dixon.

"You want to give people an opportunity to grieve, but you want to protect the safety of people on the roads," said Dixon.

Aside from drafting the guidelines, the city also suggested families consider the idea of metal bands around street lights as a memorial. McLeod said officials got the idea from the black arm bands that some grieving friends and family wear.

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