

Aurora to pursue historical designation, protection of pet cemetery

It languished under vegetation for years, becoming nearly forgotten in the process.

But it has seen new life as a dedicated team of local historians and history lovers work diligently with the Town of Aurora to uncover the stories contained on the site of what was once known as Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery.

A haven for local families ? and families from much further afield ? to lay to rest beloved pets and place lasting tributes in their memory, the south Aurora cemetery operated from 1933 to 1976 and, as work continues, the Town is poised to begin work on protecting and bringing national recognition to a very unique site.

Council this week is set to consider a recommendation from municipal staff to begin work on special recognition for the site. This could, according to a report from Robin McDougall, Aurora's Director of Community Services, include designation at the local, Provincial and National levels.

The recommendation also includes an ask for money in the Town's 2023 capital budget for permanent fencing to secure the site.

'The property was formerly used by dog breeders in the late 1920s [and] they buried their first pet on the property in 1933,' says Ms. McDougall. 'The owners erected a stone memorial that read, 'Our dear pets: they lived happy and died beloved.' This commenced the establishment of the pet cemetery.

'The Town has owned the pet cemetery lands since approximately 2011. In 2017, the Town allocated annual funds towards the restoration of the site. Starting in 2018, staff and memorial restoration contractors have attended the site with a focus on unearthing sunken stones, restoring plots, removing spurge and fallen trees, and cataloguing the stones, including their details and location within the cemetery.'

More than 800 stones have been uncovered so far on the 2,400 square metre plot of land.

Once fully restored, it is intended the site will be accessible to the public via a trail as it is otherwise surrounded by private property.

'In 2022, the focus will be to survey the property using an imaging tool for mapping burials and unmarked graves,' says Ms. McDougall. 'This survey will also assist with confirming site boundaries. During recent work at the pet cemetery, it was observed that there are some stones visible beyond the pet cemetery property line. Completing the survey work in 2022 will be critical in identifying the true boundaries of the pet cemetery. Until this work is complete, erecting a permanent fence could result in plots or headstones being excluded from the collection.'

A permanent fence, it is noted, could cost in the neighbourhood of \$60,000.

'Confirming property boundaries will be critical to determine a more accurate cost estimate,' Ms. McDougall continued. 'It is important to consider that even the permanent fence may not eliminate the risk of damage or theft, but it should provide some level of security. The fence will certainly provide a formal delineation of property boundaries. Based on the schedule of work planned for 2022, staff recommend bringing forward a capital request during the next budget deliberations for a permanent fence.

'In the interim, a temporary fence could be installed (construction fencing approximately \$1,125/month rental), but this comes with some risks. Even though it may provide a barrier to the site, the temporary fence will need to be staked into the ground which could hit a headstone yet to be discovered and if the fence were to fall over, it could damage headstones. It is important to recognize that any fence (temporary or permanent) will not guarantee that someone won't get in and cause damage. Staff would not recommend installing temporary fencing; it is believed that the risks outweigh the benefits.

?As an additional measure of security, staff will be installing wireless monitoring cameras, which will be able to monitor the site and send images to a device (much like a hunter's camera). The cameras will serve as a deterrent for any mischievous behaviour and will capture footage if the stones have been moved. It may also serve as a tool for police if criminal behaviour is captured. The cost of the cameras is minimal and will be covered through the operating budget.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter