

Aurora's Historic Pet Cemetery restoration sparks debate over hateful language on monuments

As the Town of Aurora continues planning the restoration of its historic Pet Cemetery, debate emerged at last Tuesday's Committee of the Whole meeting on how to handle several monuments engraved with racially offensive language.

The conversation follows a report submitted to Council by staff, as well as a lengthy Heritage Committee meeting discussing the potential options for the project.

The report outlines four major steps in restoring the site, including reconstructing and expanding

pathways, relocating headstones to their original locations based on historical video footage, and maintaining the landscape. However, it also calls for a decision on how to address six monuments that bear offensive inscriptions.

The report suggests several options for handling the monuments, including, "replacing the original monuments with modified replicas or removing them outright, re-engraving the blank side of the monuments with a modified inscription and placing the problematic side face down, sandblasting the offensive language off the existing monuments, or keeping the monuments as they are, but providing disclaimer or interpretive signage, as recommended by the Heritage Advisory Committee."

The report also notes that if the stones are removed, they would either be stored, disposed of, or returned to the earth. Cultural Services has indicated that the monuments will not be used in future programming or exhibitions.

David Heard, a long-time advocate for the cemetery, spoke at the Committee of the Whole meeting last week, sharing his reaching out to members of the community to get their opinions on the subject, including those who would be most affected by the language. The responses he received were mixed, with some community members strongly opposing the presence of the stones.

"Some of the comments, I'll tell you, were 'nothing positive can come from those stones to remain,'" Heard recounted, "And, 'I wouldn't want any of my friends and family to be hurt by seeing it. It would hurt.'"

Heard further emphasized, "This is a stone that's front and centre, and people are telling me that they would be hurt by it. I don't think that's the inclusive message that Aurora has been sending to its citizens and beyond."

He suggested replacing the offensive words with a more positive message, such as "inclusivity and choice," and adding a QR code and signage to allow visitors to choose whether or not they wish to engage with the full historical context.

Councillors expressed a range of opinions on how best to handle the monuments.

Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese sought advice from staff on best practices for addressing such issues, with staff confirming that while further research would be required, they had found three similar global examples where offensive monuments were removed.

Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland encouraged staff to consult cultural organizations and subject matter experts to further inform their decision-making. Staff confirmed they were developing a list of experts to consult, both locally and globally, regarding the language and memorialization practices associated with these monuments.

Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner expressed support for preserving the historical accuracy of the monuments, citing the Heritage Advisory Committee's thorough discussion on the matter.

"This was a long and complicated, and I think thorough discussion, with all points of views represented. And at the end of the discussion, the suggestion was to retain the original form of any monument to preserve historical accuracy," Gaertner said. "If our

intention is to enhance the report from the historical significance, specifically of the commemorative value of the monuments, gravestones, markers, then I think that the decision that the committee came to is valid.

In contrast, Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo strongly advocated for the immediate removal of the offensive monuments, particularly since the site would be promoted to the public.

?If it's hateful language, it should be immediately removed. That's my perspective. There's no value to having that there. It's not changing history?perhaps, it's correcting it. If it's hateful language, it shouldn't be there,? he said.

Mayor Tom Mrakas echoed Gallo's stance, adding, ?I have to say that I agree with Councillor Gallo; if it's hateful wording, hateful speech, it should not be tolerated. Especially if the Town is taking this on and promoting this to be a place for families to attend and to go and visit. If this hateful wording was on anything in the Town at this moment, anywhere, we would ask Staff to immediately go out and remove it. So, I feel the same way.?

Following the discussion, Council instructed staff to continue researching the best practices for remediating monuments with offensive language and to report back to Council at a later date.

Meanwhile, the other restoration efforts outlined in the report, including pathway reconstruction and landscape maintenance, have been approved to proceed.

By Selena Loureiro