

Heritage Committee members call for new signage for 'problematic' pet cemetery markers

Local heritage advocates have called for additional signage at the site of the Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery to 'contextualize' grave markers seen as 'problematic' through today's lens rather than erasing the offending language altogether.

These were the comments to come out of the recent meeting of Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee where members were asked for their feedback on whether the five or six stones in question should be altered.

The identified stones bear markers of pets, largely buried at the south Aurora site prior to the Second World War, whose names are now considered racist or racially charged.

Recommendations presented to the Committee 'which will make their way to Council for further consideration by the end of March' were to re-engage the stones on their blank back sides and putting the offending side face-down, sand-blasting off the offensive language, or engraving new stones altogether.

Committee members generally agreed that altering history is not the way to go; rather, they preferred to see additional signage placed on-site prior to the heritage site being opened to the public in time.

'The Archives of Ontario at York University has a giant picture wall that is basically a timeline with images from before Ontario was Ontario to about 10 years ago,' said HAC member Cynthia Bettio. 'There are a couple of images that are exactly what you're describing. The archivist felt strongly about including [the images] in the wall but they have some problematic content. This is something to consider.'

The solution here, she said, was to connect images to a QR code which would take the viewer to further information to place the inscriptions within the societal norms of the time.

'The content is important because it gives us a lot of insight as to how people used language and are understanding of those labels during that time period, in that context, and yet, in 2025, we have a different understanding,' said Bettio.

These views were shared by HAC member Bob McRoberts, who pointed to an approach rolled out by Hamilton, ON-based TV station CHCH. The station regularly airs classic television during the daytime hours, including Hogan's Heroes, which is set at a German Prisoner of War camp in the Second World War. The station plays a disclaimer at the beginning of these episodes, and those of other series, to state that while languages used and the depiction of certain groups of people were 'wrong then' as they're 'wrong now,' they are 'products of their time' and are not condoned by the station.

'What Cynthia has brought up is exactly my concern,' said McRoberts. 'I don't think it's appropriate to change history.'

Speaking to the list of options presented to the Committee, project lead Michelle Johnson of the Aurora Museum and Archives said they had considered signage to contextualize the language but said one of the reasons they recommended against doing that for each individual stone was the question of paying these stones 'more attention than other individual stones.'

'Is this the right use of resources?' asked Johnson, explaining the rationale, adding this context would be included in an overarching plaque or 'narrative' that will be on site once it opens to the public.

Bettio said that while 'we absolutely don't want to create a public space' that will offend people, you want to 'acknowledge the time period during which this place was created and acknowledge the role that those opinions, those attitudes had at the time.'

'The Royal Ontario Museum has done an excellent job with their First Peoples gallery, the Archives have done a great job, I just

feel like there is a way of maintaining the historical accuracy and the historical evidence while still in a really sensitive, inclusionary way showing people that we understand that today this is not how we memorialize, but erasing things ? it is such a hot topic right now and I think there needs to be an understanding of the tension that exists?without applying our present-day understanding in order to maintain the integrity of these historical objects.

?I think there are incredible opportunities for learning there that will show people what existed originally and open up that conversation with why we don't use that language anymore.?

By Brock Weir