

## Plan to interpret racially-insensitive markers at Pet Cemetery raises questions

Nearly a century later, they remain almost-forgotten memorials for some of Aurora's smallest residents ? but some of the tributes left by Aurorans to their four-legged friends continue to raise big questions in the community.

As work continues on restoring Aurora's historic Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery ahead of its eventual opening to the public, the Town continues to grapple with the issue of what to do with a handful of headstones from the 1930s and 40s that contain racially offensive language.

Council, sitting at the Committee level last week, revisited the issue as recommendations to address each of the offending headstones on a case-by-case basis was considered.

In a report drafted by Michelle Johnson, Collections and Exhibitions Coordinator for the Town of Aurora, staff recommended the retention of three of the markers in question in their original positions ?supported by enhanced interpretation and educational materials? on site, the removal and storage of two markers that have already been displaced from their original locations over time, and the retention of ?one severely damaged monument in its current location without reconstruction or replication of the original offensive inscription as documented in archival records.?

?During the restoration and research?staff have encountered six instances of racially-offensive language inscribed on historic monuments,? said Johnson in her report, noting that the instances in question are dogs that bore the N-word as a name. ?The presence of offensive language at the site does not define its full history, which encompasses multiple narratives, experiences, and periods of significance.?

As part of the process, staff consulted with local school boards on any concerns that might be related to ?student exposure to offensive language? during potential field trips. They also consulted with Coconut Village Elevate Consulting, bringing together participants from ?local Black and allied communities, which revealed a strong desire to retain the original language.?

?Both expressed significant concern about the presence of racially-offensive language on monuments and emphasized the potential harm such language poses to student wellbeing,? said Johnson of Board feedback. ?Representatives from both Boards indicated that if offensive language remains visible, the Boards would be unlikely to support or permit on-site student field trips to the Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery?. Both Boards emphasized that, under their policies, there is zero tolerance for the repetition or casual exposure to racial slurs, recognizing that even seeing such language can cause harm regardless of intent or context.?

The consultation with the roundtables facilitated by Coconut Village, Johnson notes, involved approximately 50 people from various sectors and ?centred on intergenerational perspectives, bringing together the knowledge and historical insight of Black elders, alongside the voices and lived realities of youth and students.?

?The consultant distinguished between a reactive and a transformative approach to addressing racially-offensive content,? said Johnson. ?A reactive model focuses on removal or obscuring language as a site-based, cosmetic response, that requires minimal financial or community investment. In contrast, a transformative model is centred on community-led planning and structural change, with the goal of building trust and sustaining long-term inclusion.?

?Consultation participants noted that retaining the historic markers does not negate the pain or discomfort associated with the language, but can create opportunities for reflection and education. While some participants leaned toward removal, they indicated that they would accept either approach, reflecting an understanding of the complexity of the issue.?

This complexity was reflected in last week's discussions at the Committee of the Whole meeting, which brought out differing views from residents and lawmakers alike.

Historian David Heard, who has been a long-time proponent of the pet cemetery and the value its preservation and designation can bring to the Aurora community said it was important for education but without the stones in question visible to all members of the public.

Heard said he spoke to several members of the Black community, including a teacher, a coach, a musician, and a mentor and he did not hear any of them say that leaving it for public view was a good thing.

There is a way to educate, I think subtly, without people coming upon it and feeling hurt, he said.

Some Council members expressed worry that removing or relocating the offending stones would be an attempt to redefine the history and context of the site including Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, who proposed that further on-site contextualization be considered.

Between erasing history, preserving, and the public-facing environment, it's a lot to handle, she said. I do really respect the consultation that was done by the participants and I understand they held some nuance and different views, and I recognize the report acknowledges there's really no pathway forward that fully eliminates all this harm, but Council's role, in my opinion, really is to determine which approach creates the least harm, while maintaining that historical integrity and public accessibility.

I feel the staff recommendation is almost there. It just needs a little bit more clarification. So, that means to me, preserving the architectural documentation, preserving the academic and historical access and ensuring proper contextualization in general. While also considering approaches that reduce unavoidable public exposure, it would be my opinion to include non-prominent treatment, shielding, relocating, partial coverage or options for interpretive access through mechanisms such QR codes or other kind of archival material. I believe that it would be in the Town's best interest really to handle these artifacts in a manner that requires intentional engagement with informed consent, rather than making it an unavoidable experience for a general visitor experience.

Citing feedback from the Heritage Advisory Committee, Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner also spoke favourably about additional contextualization.

The Heritage Advisory Committee express comments that the offensive monuments and language remain as is with appropriate disclaimer signage and interpretive learning information provided to indicate that the monuments are product of their respective time, and not reflective of current values, she said. This is a heritage site. I would hope that the school boards would have used this as a learning experience. I hope parents will use this as a learning experience.

Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, on the other hand, was in favour of the stones' removal.

This is the public realm and we have to be careful about everybody in our community, not just some people who may be interested in looking at a pet cemetery and come upon these monuments, he said. I'm not in favour of these clearly offensive markers to remain in place and not have the cemetery be placed in an emotionally unsafe place for people where it's not guaranteed. I think we have to do that.

I see the recommendations that [are in the report] and I appreciate what Councillor Gilliland is talking about, but I really don't think we need to have them in full display. I encourage them to be taken by the Museum & Archives. I think they belong in a museum where the context can be understood. When you go to a museum, you're expected to be emotionally engaged with what is in the museum. Walking in a pet cemetery, to me, doesn't qualify for that.

Council will consider the matter further at its May 26 meeting.

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