

?Problematic? headstones could be altered at historic pet cemetery

Aurora could seek to alter or re-make certain gravestones in the historic Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery which could be seen as ?problematic? through a modern lens.

Work continues to restore the Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery into a new municipal heritage space, but before restoration is complete, pathway reconstruction and monument re-location to address accessibility are being planned. Soon, part of this restoration work could address six specific headstones which Heritage Planner Adam Robb says bear ?racially offensive language.?

Potential solutions presented to the Town's Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC), which will soon make their way to Council, include replacing original monuments with ?modified replicas,? re-engraving the blank side of the monuments with modified inscriptions before laying them face-down on site, and ?removing the offensive language from existing monuments through sandblasting.?

?These updates will ensure the property remains accessible, safe and respectful of its historic significance,? said Robb in a report to HAC, which will make its way to Council with comments from HAC members.

A slideshow presented to HAC on Monday night included redacted images of the six stones in question, along with the recommended approach to rectify each example. The report noted the Town and consultants retained to bring the pet cemetery back to its former glory would work with The Fabhaven Group to make whatever changes deemed necessary. They add they're confident all of the identified stones will be able to be re-engraved rather than replaced outright.

Michelle Johnson of the Aurora Museum and Archives, who has been one of the leads on the cemetery restoration project, says the identified monuments are an issue the team has spent ?a lot of time? considering.

Interpretive signage to contextualize some of the offensive names, rather than modify the stones, was considered, she said, but that path presented its own set of issues.

?We do feel confident moving forward that the recommendation to remediate them and present a variety of options for what that could look like, as opposed to using interpretive signage to be able to provide that context,? she said. ?Interpretive signage relies on people reading it and some of the language ? you look at it, you see it, and you can't un-see it. We can't guarantee that people would read the interpretive signage and give themselves and the group they're visiting the site with that context. It's a tool [but] is it the right tool for this site and for addressing these problematic monuments? We feel more comfortable that they should be remediated in some way so that that language isn't present for when people of all backgrounds come to visit the site. It can be quite jarring, and we just want to recognize that.

?There are some alterations that we're having to make to the site to make it accessible and make it so people can experience it in the way that it was intended, when it was created. Addressing the problematic monuments is one piece of about four topics that we're having to consider altering.

?We have discovered examples where some monuments might be facing the wrong way, the treatment of them should change based on archival sources that we've found? addressing the problematic monuments is one alteration as well as the landscape maintenance and design elements.?

Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery is located in Aurora's south end, on the west side of Yonge Street. It's not visible from the road.

When restoration is complete, residents will have access to the provincially-designated heritage space through a trail connection.

By Brock Weir