

Town acquires Yonge Street greenspace for more than \$3.2 million

A parcel of greenspace has been secured by the Town of Aurora for \$3.23 million dollars.

The deal, which closed December 15, includes the lot at 14378 Yonge Street, 2,400 square metres of which is the location of the Aurora Pet Cemetery, a long-closed and somewhat forgotten burial place which has seen renewed interest in recent decades as a historic site.

'Exciting news' approximately 16-acre property at 14378 Yonge Street is now under the ownership of the Town,' said Mayor Tom Mrakas in a social media statement. 'Council unanimously approved the acquisition of this valuable asset for a total sum of \$3,170,000 plus the Land Transfer Tax of \$59,875. I believe that this approximately 16-acre property will contribute significantly to the expansion of much-needed parkland space for our growing community along Yonge Street in Ward 4.

'Looking ahead, I am looking forward to a detailed report to Council where we will discuss the specifics of potential parkland uses and explore additional opportunities for this property that will benefit our community.'

The property in question was designated by Council to be 'of cultural heritage value or interest' in 2022 and has seen use as the Happy Woodlawn 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 and the designation moved forward, the Town was poised to begin work on protecting and bringing national recognition to a very unique site.

'The property was formerly used by dog breeders in the late 1920s [and] they buried their first pet on the property in 1933,' said Robin McDougall, Aurora's Director of Community Services, at the time. '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,' said 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.'

Carley Smith, Aurora's Manager of Corporate Communications, says the new acquisition 'creates some great potential for future additional access points once the pet cemetery is able to be opened to the public.'

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter