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Town of Aurora
Committee of the Whole Report
No. PDS25-030

Subject: Heritage Permit Application HPA-2025-01
Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery

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Manager, Policy Planning and Heritage

Department: Planning and Development Services

Date: March 4, 2025

Recommendation

1. That Report No. PDS25-030 be received; and
2. That staff continue to consult and investigate options regarding the remediation of monuments with offensive language and report back to Council; and
3. That the other restorations and improvements for the Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery as otherwise proposed through Heritage Permit Application HPA-2025-01 be approved.

Executive Summary

This report provides Council with an overview of the proposed restorations and improvements for the Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery (14314-14378 Yonge).

- With the property now designated under the Ontario Heritage Act, alterations are required to receive Council approval.
- The proposed work is intended to continue to enhance the property through key restoration efforts that aim to preserve its historical significance and prepare the site for future public access.

Background

With the property now designated under the Ontario Heritage Act, alterations are required to receive Council approval.

The property was designated in 2023 through By-law No. 6520-23 and maintains a legacy as the first pet cemetery in Canada.

The Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery began under the ownership of the Blochin family. Victor Blochin was a prisoner of war in Germany, where during his capture, he became friends with another captive, Angus Campbell, the Lord of Dunstaffnage Castle in Scotland. After the war ended, Blochin moved with Campbell to Scotland to work as a gardener at the castle. Campbell was a breeder of West Highland White Terriers and gifted one to Blochin. By the 1920s, Blochin left for Canada, taking a number of Westie dogs with him. Blochin settled on the subject property and opened a kennel. Victor and his wife Anne began burying their beloved pets on the property, and over time others began too as well. The burials are marked by a number of various gravestones of all different sizes and materials.

The 2023 designation by-law recognizes this historical significance of the property and aims to ensure its continued protection and restoration, specifically noting the significance of the commemorative gravestones/monuments and markers and the location set within a naturalized forested area.

Analysis

The proposed work is intended to continue to enhance the property through key restoration efforts that aim to preserve its historical significance and prepare the site for future public access.

The efforts as part of this Heritage Permit Application include the following:

1) Pathway Reconstruction

- The original path stones have been uncovered and are partially restored, but the overall path system through the site remains incomplete. The proposed reconstruction with fieldstone and permeable foundations will ensure stability and longevity while complementing and preserving the original aesthetic. Reconstruction of the pathways is essential before any monument relocation can occur.

2) Monument Relocation and Restoration

- During the later years of operation, approximately 140 monuments were relocated and these will need to be redistributed throughout the cemetery. This relocation will follow identified patterns based on in-depth GPS data, starting in the less dense east side and moving westward, and prioritizing featured perimeters.
- Archival footage from 1966 also reveals that many monuments, presently laid flat, were originally standing or leaning. These will be safely repositioned in line with the site's original historic appearance.

3) Addressing Problematic Monuments

- Six monuments feature inscriptions with racially offensive language. Options for remediation include but are not necessarily limited to:
 - a) Replacing the original monuments with modified replicas (or removing outright)
 - b) Re-engraving the blank side of the monuments with a modified inscription and then laying the problematic side face down
 - c) Removing the offensive language from the existing monuments outright through sandblasting
 - d) Per comments received by the Heritage Advisory Committee, leaving the monuments generally 'as-is' but providing disclaimer/interpretive signage.

The type of remediation required will depend on the state of each individual monument. If the original monument is entirely removed, it should be returned to the earth, stored, or disposed of. Cultural Services has indicated that these monuments will not be used for future exhibitions or programming. Cultural Services has also indicated that any actions taken to remove or remediate the offensive language will be documented as part of the project and addressed in interpretive signage on site. The Heritage Advisory Committee also provided comments for the monuments to remain "as-is" but that disclaimer signage or interactive learning opportunities (QR codes etc.) be installed to caution that the monuments are a product of their respective time period, and not of current values. Cultural Services staff have indicated that while there may be learning opportunities in keeping the monuments "as-is", the success of this approach would be partially dependent on having a facilitator present and ensuring that the material is indeed actually read, and

understood, by the respective visitors. Such learning opportunities may be found in museum-like settings where staff and facilitators are present, however the pet cemetery will largely be an unfacilitated and un-staffed site. Cultural Services has indicated that leaving the original language in place does not align with the goal of restoring the Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery to be a safe and welcoming space for all, and that the potential negative impacts to the visitor experience may outweigh the potential benefits of turning this into a learning opportunity. Cultural Services staff are not supportive of the “as-is” approach, but additional investigation and consultation can occur prior to reporting back to Council for an ultimate decision on this component of the work.

4) Landscape Maintenance and Design Elements

- To prepare the site for future full public access, several landscaping improvements are needed:
 - Permanent seating and fencing
 - Interpretive signage
 - Tree Pruning and servicing
 - Decorative plantings
 - Retaining walls or other features for stabilizing the site

These updates will ensure the property remains accessible, safe, and respectful of its historical significance. The recommended alterations listed above are necessary to restore the site to its intended form and prepare the site for future public access.

Advisory Committee Review

The Heritage Permit Application was presented to the Heritage Advisory Committee for review on February 3, 2025. The Heritage Advisory Committee was largely supportive of the overall general site works, however, as discussed above, the Committee expressed comments that the offensive monuments and language instead remain “as-is”, with appropriate disclaimer signage and interpretive learning information provided to indicate that the monuments are a product of their respective time, and not reflective of current values.

Legal Considerations

Under Section 42 of the Ontario Heritage Act, any alterations that would potentially impact the heritage character of a designated property requires Council's consent. This legislative requirement is implemented in the Town of Aurora through the process of a Heritage Permit Application, which is subject to Council's approval in consultation with the Heritage Advisory Committee. Council must typically make a decision on a heritage permit application within 90 days after the notice of receipt is served on the applicant, otherwise Council shall be deemed to have consented to the application. The 90-day deadline for this permit application is April 23, 2025. However, this application is Town-initiated and pertains to Town-owned lands and therefore can be extended without any limit under the Ontario Heritage Act.

Financial Implications

The Pet Cemetery's restoration is being administered through Project No. AM0203 under Community Service's leadership. At present, this project's total budget authority is \$118,400, of which a total of \$62,605 has been spent to date. The remaining \$55,795 in unspent budget authority is forecasted to be completed in 2025.

Communications Considerations

As restoration efforts of the Pet Cemetery proceed, appropriate updates will continue to be made available to the public.

Climate Change Considerations

The restoration of the Pet Cemetery will involve sensitive protection and enhancement of landscape elements to further preserve the natural forested setting of the area.

Link to Strategic Plan

The conservation of heritage resources supports the Strategic Plan goal of Supporting an Exceptional Quality of Life for All through its accomplishment in satisfying the requirements under Celebrating and Promoting our Culture.

Alternatives to the Recommendation

1. That Heritage Permit Application HPA-2025-01 be refused.

2. That Heritage Permit Application HPA-2025-01 be approved, subject to any other modifications or conditions of approval.

Conclusions

Heritage Permit Application HPA-2025-01 seeks to restore and enhance the Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery as part of preparing the site for future public access. Since the property is individually designated under Part IV of the Ontario Heritage Act, Council approval of the restoration work and preferred options is required.

Attachments

1. Attachment #1 – Summary of Restoration Work
2. Attachment #2 – Air Photo of Property

Previous Reports

Heritage Advisory Committee Memorandum dated February 3, 2025.

Pre-submission Review

Agenda Management Team review on February 13, 2025

Approvals

Approved by Marco Ramunno, Director, Planning and Development Services

Approved by Doug Nadorozny, Chief Administrative Officer