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Town of Aurora

Committee of the Whole Report

No. CMS26-003

Subject: Community Reflection Space Concept Plan

Prepared by: Michelle Johnson, Exhibitions and Collections Coordinator

Department: Community Services

Date: February 10, 2026

Recommendation

1. That Report No. CMS26-003 be received; and
2. That the design for the Community Reflection Space be approved.

Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to present Council with the proposed design for the Community Reflection Space, a dedicated location where the community can gather in times of sorrow to collectively honour and pay respects to those affected by tragic events.

- The Reflection Space design transforms an area currently marked by worn hardscaping and stressed vegetation into an inclusive community setting that supports both group gatherings and individual contemplation
- Several symbolic and cross-cultural references are present within the Reflection Space to facilitate an inclusive, peaceful and safe environment
- The design increases connectivity to existing amenities while enhancing security and safety
- Accessibility is a core principle of the design ensuring that all visitors can engage meaningfully with the site

- The design proposes a significant reduction in the amount of hardscaping by introducing more landscaped elements that follow a practical maintenance and planting plan
- The Reflection Space creates an adaptable, enhanced setting that supports and elevates Town Hall flag raising ceremonies
- Council's approval of the recommendations will allow staff to proceed with next steps

Background

The Community Reflection Space was first proposed by the Indigenous Relations Committee on January 16, 2023, as a place for Truth and Reconciliation. Its scope later expanded to include reflection for all tragic situations, recognizing the need for a dedicated space for collective grief.

Council directed staff to undertake broader public consultation before finalizing a location. Four potential sites were considered: Lambert Willson Park, Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park, Town Hall, and Town Park. Based on feedback from advisory committees, community organizations, and residents, Council approved staff's recommendation at its July 9, 2024, meeting to locate the Community Reflection Space at Town Hall.

This decision was informed by several key factors: Town Hall offers a publicly connected yet secluded area that provides privacy, close parking, and staff oversight, while avoiding conflicts with recreational activities common in parks. Interested parties emphasized the need to de-politicize grief and maintain the space as peaceful and inclusive. These insights have guided the development of the design concept presented in this report. Funding for the Reflection Space in the amount of \$250,000 was approved as part of the 2024 Budget. To maximize efficiencies and project budgets the design and construction of the Reflection Space has been combined with the rehabilitation of the South Town Hall Parking Lot scheduled to begin later this year.

Analysis

The Reflection Space design transforms an area currently marked by worn hardscaping and stressed vegetation into an inclusive community setting that supports both group gatherings and individual contemplation

Located outside of the front entrance of Town Hall, the Reflection Space features two distinct sections known as the “River Plaza” and the “Sky Ribbon Forest” (Attachment 1). These areas flow into one another seamlessly and are designed around features that speak to unity, peaceful gatherings, and meaningful reflection. The current condition of the landscape surrounding Town Hall has several deficiencies, which have helped inform the direction of the new design.

The paving and hardscape surfaces are in poor condition, which is especially evident in areas where concrete meets unit pavers, resulting in uneven surfaces and tripping hazards (Figure 1). The current layout and condition due to age and general wear and tear, create irregularities in appearance and useability, which detract from the overall aesthetic and present challenges for accessibility and maintenance. The redesign proposes replacing these older pavers with new, thoughtfully selected materials that enhances accessibility and functionality.



Figure 1 Example of existing pavers in need or replacement

The sloped areas within the “Sky Ribbon Forest” section are experiencing significant erosion, particularly where soils are sandy and unstable. This has contributed to the deterioration of existing features, including the armour stone retaining wall, which has begun to shift (Figure 2). In the proposed design, these conditions will be addressed through strategic regrading, improved drainage management, and dense plantings of native, slope-stabilizing species to create a more resilient and long-lasting landscape.



Figure 2 Erosion impacting the armour stone retaining wall on the southeast side of Town Hall

Additionally, some of the existing trees are unhealthy and struggling, likely due to compacted soils, lack of appropriate growing conditions, or long-term exposure to heat and hardscaping. The current landscape lacks the layered vegetation and soil structure needed to support long-term tree vitality, further contributing to plant stress. The Town Arborist has identified several of these trees for removal as part of the re-development of the space (Figure 3 and Figure 4).



Figure 3 Trees on the southeast side of Town Hall are identified for removal with a red "x".



Figure 4 Trees on the southeast side of Town Hall are identified for removal with a red "x".

Several symbolic and cross-cultural references are present within the Reflection Space to facilitate an inclusive, peaceful and safe environment

During the consultation phase, the importance of including cross-cultural references to grief, peace, and unity was raised by representatives from Oasis Bereavement and the York Regional Police. These elements are expressed in the design in several ways, most prominently in the "River Plaza" and Sky Ribbon feature.

The "River Plaza" design (Attachment 1) features independently poured, cast in place, concrete slabs (rivers) with a variety of finishes. The rivers all lead to a large central gathering area. This design visually represents the many paths, cultures, and lived experiences that bring people to Aurora, symbolizing how diverse community journeys flow toward a shared gathering place. These converging forms emphasize unity, connection, and belonging within the Reflection Space.

The central gathering area is circular in form and features a raised circular podium, which is chair height and can be used for seating or staging. This central gathering place serves as a junction; connecting the River Plaza and Sky Ribbon Forest. As the symbolic point where all rivers converge, it functions as the heart of the space, a shared place for community expression (Attachment 2).

The Sky Ribbon feature (Attachment 3) is a shallow reflective water feature that brings the Earth and Sky together. It is animated by adding a small amount of water to the linear pool, which creates a reflection of the sky at ground level. In doing so, this feature illuminates the infinite to create a meaningful contemplative environment. The use of a reflective water feature also responds to the cross-cultural significance of water, which

has long been recognized in many traditions, including those dating back to ancient Persia, as a symbol of reflection, continuity, and spiritual connection.

The design increases connectivity to existing amenities while enhancing security and safety

The location of the Reflection Space provides strong connectivity to adjacent amenities, including the Arboretum and Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park. Two options were considered to enhance this connection. The preferred option introduces an accessible ramp along the east slope within the Sky Ribbon forest section, creating a direct link to John West Way. An alternative option would establish a secondary entrance by extending a pathway from the south parking lot sidewalk.

To maintain security and functionality, vehicular access within the Reflection Space will be prohibited. Current behaviors, such as driving through accessible stalls and between flagpoles, will be addressed through design changes. Flagpoles will be repositioned, accessible parking relocated, and armour stone incorporated as a natural barrier and delineating feature. The design includes distinct areas for both community gatherings and individual contemplation, with Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) principles integrated to ensure safety.

Accessibility is a core principle of the design ensuring that all visitors can engage meaningfully with the site

Accessible parking stalls, currently divided on either side of the Town Hall entrance, will be consolidated on the west side (Figure #5). This location provides a safer and more convenient option, allowing visitors to exit their vehicles without crossing paths with incoming or circulating traffic in the main lot.

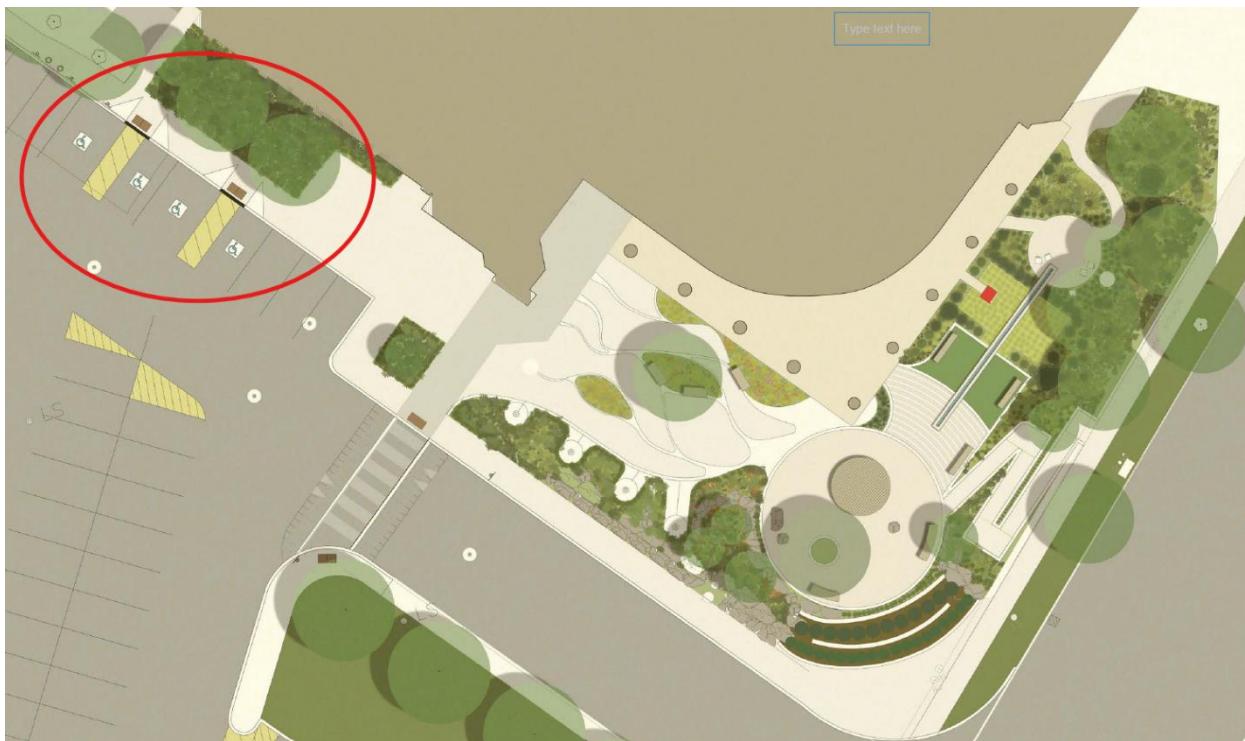


Figure 5 The new location for accessible parking stalls shown within the red oval.

The site features gentle, natural grade variations to define distinct zones while maintaining accessibility. The plaza remains level, and landscaped mounds introduce subtle elevation changes for privacy and noise buffering without steep slopes. The Reflection Space will feature smooth, level surfaces with expansion joints that are the same as those used in standard sidewalks. All transitions are gradual and visually integrated, ensuring comfort and mobility for all visitors. Accessibility concerns regarding mobility through grass were raised by the Accessibility Advisory Committee, and the design team will explore adding an accessible path to ensure equitable access.

The design includes accessible seating throughout as well as near the re-positioned flagpoles ensuring that attendees who cannot stand for long periods can fully participate in ceremonies. These seats are located along barrier-free routes within the plaza, allowing individuals using mobility devices to reach and remain in the gathering area without difficulty. This ensures that inclusive viewing options are integrated directly into the event space.

The design proposes a significant reduction in the amount of hardscaping by introducing more landscaped elements that follow a practical maintenance and planting plan

The design reduces paved surfaces at the front by approximately 40%, supporting a more sustainable and visually appealing layout. Snow removal will primarily be

managed with snowblowers, subject to staff capacity, and all perennials selected will be salt-tolerant to withstand winter conditions.

Plantings will stabilize slopes and include salt-tolerant species where necessary. An aggressive planting approach will be used to accelerate establishment and minimize start-up maintenance. The planting plan is still in development, but examples of plant species being considered include American Black Currant, Bush Honeysuckle, Snowberries, and native grasses such as Prairie Dropseed and Oak Sedge. The planting plan is being developed with input and guidance from the Town's Parks Division.

The design incorporates a turf seed mix in a small, intentional contemplative area, while all slopes and soft-scaped zones will use dense, native groundcover plantings selected for durability, salt tolerance, and slope stabilization.

The Reflection Space creates an adaptable, enhanced setting that supports and elevates Town Hall flag-raising ceremonies

This design introduces a large and open area that can comfortably support substantial crowds, improving both comfort and circulation during events. In the new layout, the three existing flagpoles are repositioned and a fourth has been added. This creates a more intentional configuration that supports current flag-raising formats and provides capacity for future flag expansion.

The new circular platform serves as a flexible feature for speakers or ceremony leads, offering modest elevation that improves visibility without the need for a formal stage. The surrounding plaza also includes added seating to provide comfort for attendees during flag raising ceremonies, ensuring that participants can remain close to the event without standing for extended periods.

Council's approval of the recommendations will allow staff to proceed with next steps

To advance this project, the next steps include finalizing the design and tendering the project for construction in tandem with the Town Hall Parking Lot capital project.

Advisory Committee Review

The design has been brought forward to the Accessibility Advisory Committee, Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee as well as the Indigenous Relations Committee.

The Accessibility Advisory Committee expressed overall support for the accessible elements incorporated into the Reflection Space design, including the barrier-free circulation routes, accessible seating near the flagpoles, smooth paving surfaces, and clear opportunities for inclusive participation during ceremonies. Committee members also raised several constructive questions, including concerns about the usability of crushed limestone surfaces, the ability to access the grassy areas and the Sky Ribbon feature with mobility devices, and the height and functionality of the central platform for speakers using wheelchairs.

The Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee was overall supportive of the Reflection Space design and posed several thoughtful questions. Committee members asked how the space would function during high-tension e.g. political or emotionally charged gatherings. The consultant noted that the design cannot account for the entire spectrum of emotions that may arise during community gatherings, but it does use a progression of spaces and landscape elements to help diffuse intensity and guide quieter reflective use. Members also asked about pathway impacts, material choices, and general functionality.

The Indigenous Relations Committee supported adding more natural planting areas to help connect people to the land in a meaningful way. Committee members raised questions about seating and how people of all ages and abilities would move through the space. They also valued having places for cultural offerings and supported the long-term goal of creating a welcoming area that can grow with Aurora's diverse communities.

Feedback from all three committees has been incorporated into the design being presented.

Legal Considerations

None.

Financial Implications

Through capital project No. AM0337 – Town Hall Community Reflection Space Council has approved a total of \$275,000 in budget authority in support of this space's design and construction.

Communications Considerations

The Community Reflection Space will serve as an important gathering place in Aurora where residents can come together in times of sorrow and to honour those affected by tragic events. The Town will promote the space through a variety of communications channels, including: the Town website, social media platforms, the Notice Board, a media release, and mention in the Town external newsletter.

Climate Change Considerations

Green infrastructure and green procurement will be considered during construction to minimize the impacts of a changing climate.

Link to Strategic Plan

The Community Reflection Space supports the following Strategic Plan goals and key objectives:

Supporting an exceptional quality of life for all in its accomplishment in satisfying requirements in the following key objectives within these goal statements:

- Celebrating and promoting our culture
- Strengthening the fabric of our community
- Encouraging an active and healthy lifestyle

Alternative(s) to the Recommendation

1. Council may provide further direction.

Conclusions

This report provides an update on the Reflection Space project and seeks Council's approval of the design.

Attachments

Attachment 1 – “River Plaza” and “Sky Ribbon” Forest Sketches

Attachment 2 – Community Reflection Space Overview

Attachment 3 – Sky Ribbon Feature

Attachment 4 – Community Reflection Space Model

Attachment 5 – Presentation

Previous Reports

CMS23-050, Outdoor Community Reflection Space, November 21, 2023; and CMS24-022, Community Reflection Space Location, July 9, 2024.

Pre-submission Review

Agenda Management Team review on January 22, 2026

Approvals

Approved by Robin McDougall, Director, Community Services

Approved by Doug Nadorozny, Chief Administrative Officer