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Town of Aurora
Committee of the Whole Report
No. CMS26-013

Subject: Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery Monument Alteration Plan

Prepared by: Michelle Johnson, Collection and Exhibitions Coordinator

Department: Community Services

Date: May 12, 2026

Recommendation

1. That Report No. CMS26-013 be received; and
2. That Council endorse a case-by-case approach to addressing racially offensive language on monuments within the Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery, including:
 - a. Retention of three monuments located in their original historic positions, supported by enhanced interpretation and educational materials;
 - b. Documented removal and storage of two monuments previously displaced from their original locations; and
 - c. Retention of one severely damaged monument in its current condition, without reconstruction or replication of the original offensive inscription as documented in archival records.

Executive Summary

This report provides Council with a summary of consultation findings and research regarding the offensive language that appears on historic monuments at the Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery.

- The Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery contains six monuments with racially offensive language
- A review of industry practice, procedures, and responses to offensive language in historic contexts has been completed

- Staff consulted with local schoolboards regarding concerns about student exposure to offensive language during potential on-site field trips
- Coconut Village Elevate Consulting (CVEC) led an in-depth consultation process that included participants from local Black and allied communities, which revealed a strong desire to retain the original language
- Staff identify value in considering a case-by-case approach to addressing the offensive language on the monuments
- The CVEC consultation identified the importance of reparative investment in the Black community, which will be explored by staff and brought back to Council as part of the budget process.
- Staff identify meaningful risks and limitations associated with all potential solutions

Background

The Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery is a municipally designated heritage property under the Ontario Heritage Act, designated in 2023 through By-law No. 6520-23 in recognition of its significance as the first pet cemetery in Canada. Dedicated in 1934, the site was formally opened to the public for pet burials and remained in operation until 1978. During that period, more than 800 named pets were interred, resulting in a varied collection of commemorative gravestones and markers situated within a naturalized, forested landscape. The designation by-law identifies the monuments and their woodland setting as key heritage attributes requiring protection and careful stewardship.

In March 2025, Council considered a staff report seeking approval for proposed alterations under a heritage permit; that permit remains open. Since that time, staff have undertaken additional research and consultation related to concerns about certain potentially offensive gravestones within the cemetery. This report summarizes the work completed to date and presents Council with options for a potential pathway forward.

Analysis

The Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery contains six monuments with racially offensive language

During the restoration and research of the Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery, staff have encountered six instances of racially offensive language inscribed on historic monuments. The language appears as the name of the pet that was buried on site. These monuments are listed below, with their unique internal catalogue number, and when known, are followed by pet name, family name, species, year of birth, year of death, and age:

1. A2-2, "N*****" Breen, Pony, born 1914, died 1959, age 47 years.
2. A5-48, "N*****" Sharpe, age 13 years
3. A6-61, "N*****" Ridout, born 1930, died 1942
4. B1-55, "N*****"
5. C4-44, "N*****" Sears, age 15 years.
6. C5-13, "N*****" Taylor

Of the six monuments, three were uncovered in their original location (A2-2, C4-44, B1-55), two were uncovered within a collection of 140 monuments that had been previously re-located (A5-48, A6-61), and one is severely damaged with only a fragment remaining (C5-13). The presence of offensive language at the site does not define its full history, which encompasses multiple narratives, experiences, and periods of significance.

A review of industry practice, procedures, and responses to offensive language in historic contexts has been completed

The annotated bibliography prepared for this report (Attachment 1) demonstrates that there is no single prescribed approach to addressing racially offensive language in heritage contexts; rather, museums, archives and heritage professionals apply a range of strategies depending on context, significance, and audience. Some sources choose to retain offensive language in place and address it through clear contextual interpretation, emphasizing that its presence reflects historical nuance rather than endorsement. There are also many examples that demonstrate modifying, replacing, or removing inscriptions, particularly where language continues to cause harm or distracts from the intended commemorative purpose. Across all approaches, common themes include transparency, consultation, and a clear institutional stance that distinguishes acknowledgement of the past from contemporary values.

Staff consulted with local schoolboards regarding concerns about student exposure to offensive language during potential on-site field trips

Staff consulted with representatives from the York Region District School Board and the York Region Catholic District School Board. Both expressed significant concern about the presence of racially offensive language on monuments and emphasized the potential harm such language poses to student wellbeing. 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.

It was noted that within school settings, the use of materials containing racial slurs is governed by structured text-selection policies that assess age appropriateness, educational purpose, and potential harm. 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. To ensure broad and meaningful access to this historic site, staff will continue working with local schoolboards and community organizations to co-develop culturally sensitive, curriculum-aligned facilitated learning opportunities.

Coconut Village Elevate Consulting (CVEC) led an in-depth consultation process that included participants from local Black and allied communities, which revealed a strong desire to retain the original language

Consultation took place from December 2025 to April 2026 in the form of round-table sessions, small in-person group discussions, virtual discussions, and one-on-one conversations. The consultation process involved a diverse and multidisciplinary group of participants, intentionally reflecting both professional expertise and lived experience. Contributors included approximately 50 individuals from the legal sector, law enforcement, education, healthcare, psychotherapy, advocacy, entrepreneurship, and community development.

The process also centred intergenerational perspectives, bringing together the knowledge and historical insight of Black elders alongside the voices and lived realities of youth and students. Participants represented both Black and allied communities, ensuring a breadth of perspectives grounded in cultural competency, equity, and community accountability.

The consultant distinguished between a reactive and a transformative approach to addressing racially offensive content. 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. Within this framework, three pathways forward were provided for consideration.

Option #1: Interpretive Preservation and Education-Focused Approach

Maintain the cemetery in its current physical state, including the retention of existing offensive language on monuments, while enhancing interpretation, education, and public understanding through clear, accessible learning tools.

Option #2: Designated Cultural Space, Public Art, and Legacy Investment Approach

Preserve the cemetery in its current physical condition, with existing offensive language remaining in place, while advancing a cultural recognition approach that includes a designated on-site cultural space and complementary town-wide public art and storytelling initiative.

Option #3: Conditional Removal or Alteration with Reparative Investment Framework

Removal or alteration of monuments through a clear, accountable framework that prioritizes careful documentation, respect for the site's heritage, and meaningful community consent. Under this approach, removal needs to be accompanied by immediate corresponding reparative investment, ensuring that interventions are linked to tangible measures that acknowledge harm and support longer-term community benefit.

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.

Staff identify value in considering a case-by-case approach to addressing the offensive language on the monuments

A case-by-case approach to addressing the racially offensive language should be considered, rather than a single uniform solution. This enables the Town to balance heritage conservation and harm-reduction principles, with community and stakeholder perspectives. It also provides Council with flexibility in determining a pathway forward that is sensitive to both historical significance and contemporary values.

Based on consultation, the three monuments (A2-2, C4-44, B1-55) that were uncovered in their original historic location should remain as-is, unaltered, with the implementation of interpretation and education recommendations outlined in Option #1 above.

The two monuments (A5-48, A6-61) that were already displaced from their original location and recovered from the collection of approximately 140 monuments should be removed and placed in storage. The removal would be documented, and the monuments would be placed within the Aurora Museum & Archives Collection Storage Area. On-site acknowledgment of their existence and the decision to remove them will be developed along with responsible interpretation and ongoing public education.

One monument (C5-13) is severely damaged and over half of it was removed from the site prior to town restoration commencing. The portion on site has no offensive language present, however during research staff uncovered a newspaper article and photograph that depicted the monument in its complete form. This documentation revealed racially offensive language, and the recommendation is to leave the monument as is and not reproduce the in-tact monument as shown in archival documentation.

The CVEC consultation identified the importance of reparative investment in the Black community, which will be explored by staff and brought back to Council as part of the budget process.

All options presented by CVEC recommended the establishment of a community investment fund. The consultation process recognized the Town's established practice of investing in and stewarding its historic assets and identified an opportunity to apply a similar level of intention and investment toward the lived experiences and histories of communities affected by that legacy.

The fund is described by CVEC as a mechanism to respond to the impacts and considerations associated with the offensive language at the Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery. The concept was framed to pair decisions about the site with broader educational, cultural, and community-led initiatives related to Black history and lived experience. The consultant noted that such a fund could support both time-limited activities, such as workshops, speaker series, and public learning opportunities, as well as longer-term investments in cultural programming, artist commissions, and community-driven initiatives.

Staff recognize the importance of parallel investment in the Black community alongside the restoration and development of the historic Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery and will

continue to research the process and report back to Council, including any budgetary impacts.

Staff identify risks and limitations associated with all potential solutions

Given the presence of offensive language, monuments left unchanged face an increased risk of damage, theft, vandalism, or unsanctioned reinterpretation. Staff recognize there isn't a pathway forward that fully eliminates harm. Retaining the monuments in their current state would result in continued public exposure to offensive language and could limit the site's suitability for public school programming. Staff will continue to consult with the schoolboard to find appropriate ways to access the history of the site. Another risk is how this decision is framed and represented in the larger conversation about Aurora.

Consultation findings indicate that a reactive approach focused on removing all instances of offensive language may carry unintended risks, particularly for members of the Black community who do not support the removal or censoring of this aspect of local Black history. Participants noted that removal without consent or immediate reparative support could be experienced as erasure, underscoring the need to carefully consider how different approaches may affect communities in distinct ways.

Staff acknowledge the need to carefully balance these considerations in evaluating potential pathways forward.

Advisory Committee Review

Heritage Permit Application HPA-2025-01 was presented to the Heritage Advisory Committee for review on February 3, 2025, detailing the restoration efforts to the Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery, including pathway reconstruction, monument relocation, and landscaping. Council approved these restoration efforts but directed staff to continue exploring options for addressing monuments with offensive language and report back to Council. The Heritage Advisory Committee expressed 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 a product of their respective time, and not reflective of current values. Once Council provides direction regarding the course of action for the offensive monuments the heritage permit application itself will be considered completed from a file maintenance/technical approval perspective, but further consultation with the HAC can still occur as the project and its detailed design work advances.

Legal Considerations

The Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery is a designated heritage property under the Ontario Heritage Act. Any removal, alteration, or relocation of monuments requires Council approval and must be consistent with the heritage process.

If provided by the Town, any interpretive, educational, or programming materials must be developed and delivered in a manner consistent with the Town's obligations under the Ontario Human Rights Code.

Financial Implications

Any monument restoration work will be completed under the Town's existing approved capital project No. AM-0203 – Pet Cemetery Restoration with a current budget authority of \$118,400. Of this amount, approximately \$40,000 remains unspent.

Communications Considerations

There are no specific communications actions required as a result of this report. Staff will continue to work collaboratively to ensure appropriate information is provided on-site and, where applicable, through Town communication channels as next steps are implemented.

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.

Alternative(s) to the Recommendation

1. That all monuments containing offensive language be removed.
2. That all monuments containing offensive language remain as-is.

3. That Council provide further direction.

Conclusions

This report summarizes the research and consultation undertaken to address the presence of racially offensive language on six monuments at the Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery. Staff reviewed industry practices, consulted with local school boards, and engaged CVEC to gather perspectives from Black and allied community members. The findings indicate differing viewpoints, identified risks and limitations across all pathways, and support consideration of a case-by-case approach to decision-making. Ultimately, the site should be understood not solely through the presence of offensive language, but through the wider and more complex histories it continues to reveal and invite reflection upon.

Attachments

1. Attachment #1 – Annotated Bibliography

Previous Reports

PDS25-030, Heritage Permit Application HPA-2025-01 Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery, March 4, 2025

Heritage Advisory Committee Memorandum dated February 3, 2025.

Pre-submission Review

Agenda Management Team review on April 23, 2026

Approvals

Approved by Robin McDougall, Director, Community Services

Approved by Doug Nadorozny, Chief Administrative Officer