

Staff Report

Corporate Services Department



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REPORT TO: Committee of the Whole

DATE OF MEETING: December 16, 2024

SUBMITTED BY: Victoria Raab, General Manager, Corporate Services
519-783-8991

PREPARED BY: Victoria Raab, General Manager, Corporate Services
519-783-8991

WARD(S) INVOLVED: All Wards

DATE OF REPORT: December 16, 2024

REPORT NO.: COR-2024-539

SUBJECT: Queen Victoria Statue Report Back

RECOMMENDATION:

That Council receive the Queen Victoria Statue report; and,

That staff be directed to take no further action associated with directions from COR-2022-253; and further,

That the exploration of a co-led, co-designed commemorative public art installation in Victoria Park be referred to the Arts and Creative Industries Action Plan, which is expected to be presented to Council in Q4 of 2025.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS:

- The purpose of this report is to summarize action taken on COR-2022-253 and seek Council direction to explore a co-led, co-developed commemorative public art installation in Victoria Park that honours local Indigenous history, promotes an understanding of the impact of colonization, and can work to bring the community together in the spirit of reconciliation.
- There are no financial implications associated with this report, however it should be acknowledged that a co-developed, co-designed commemorative art installation should be substantial and will have financial implications in future budget years and will be identified in a future report to Council.
- Community engagement was conducted at the onset of COR-2022-253 and included a Witnessing Circle group discussion and digital, public “Ask Me Anything” session.
- This report does not contain a recommendation regarding the future of the statue (e.g. take it down, leave it up, cover it, move it) and as such it will remain in place unless otherwise directed by Council.
- This report supports **the delivery of core services.**

*** This information is available in accessible formats upon request. ***
Please call 519-741-2345 or TTY 1-866-969-9994 for assistance.

BACKGROUND:

The Queen Victoria Statue in Victoria Park has been the subject of criticism and activism since July 1, 2021, when the statue was first doused in red paint. The first event occurred on Canada Day, and shortly after hundreds of unmarked graves were found at former residential schools across Canada. In total, the statue has been covered in paint six times since July 2021.

In response to these events, and in response to public calls by members of Indigenous and racialized communities and allies to remove the statue, in 2022 Council directed staff to launch an equity-driven community engagement process to gather ideas and feedback from the community with respect to the Queen Victoria Statue. Council further directed staff to launch a public education process around the history related to Queen Victoria, the statue and its impacts, and further, commission new temporary public artwork while the engagement process occurs.

To advance this work, staff retained Jay Pitter Placemaking, an external consultant and award-winning placemaker with experience and expertise in city-building projects that specialize in public space design and inclusive public engagement.

Public engagement launched in November 2022 with an online, interactive digital session. This was followed by an in-person event. After concluding these two sessions, Ms. Pitter recommended that future work on this project should proceed more slowly. Staff paused further engagement at this time and began to do more research on best practices for public engagement on historically controversial subjects, and best practices on public engagement in challenging contexts.

REPORT:

Public Consultation

Engagement on this project began with an online interactive public session on the City's Instagram account called "Ask Jay Anything". Together with city staff, Ms. Pitter held a live, interactive question and answer forum, designed to both introduce Ms. Pitter to the Kitchener community as the lead consultant on the project, and to allow members of the community to ask questions and receive answers about the project in an open and transparent way.

[The questions raised and responses to them were posted publicly on the City's Engage Kitchener website.](#)

In addition to the Ask Jay Anything event, Ms. Pitter organized and led a Witnessing Circle at the Kitchener Market. This engagement tactic enabled participants from a multitude of backgrounds and communities an opportunity to unpack different perspectives and share their own thoughts and feelings related to the statue. The objective of the Witnessing Circle was to create a safer space for dialogue and discussion, hearing about personal experiences in relation to the statue, without focusing on a future outcome. The event focused on listening and learning and understanding the tensions and different experiences of individuals and communities, recognizing that communities do not share monolithic views. Approximately 100 individuals registered for the Witnessing Circle, with 56 individuals attending the event.

Temporary Public Art Installation

In September, 2022, the Every Child Matters Crosswalk was installed in Victoria Park, a semi-permanent installation led by a community-based committee of Indigenous community members and allies who wanted to “honour the children lost and those who still live with the generational trauma caused by residential schools”. The committee also led the installation of an orange footprint path in Victoria Park, and their efforts were supported by staff through a Love My Hood matching grant. Following the unveiling ceremony for the crosswalk, several pairs of children’s shoes were added to the base of the Queen Victoria Statue. This action was led by the Every Child Matters Crosswalk Committee as a way to further visually represent and mourn the loss of children at residential schools. It was parallel to the footprints in the park, and an opportunity and invitation for other community members and park visitors to participate in the event and reflect in a continued way.

After witnessing the positive, organic community interaction with this display, staff discussed with the Committee leaders the opportunity to leave the shoes in place as a temporary art installation. A simple ceremony marked this installation, and the story behind the shoes was communicated publicly on the City’s website, and in the media.

Public Education

As staff began to prepare a project plan to move forward on the public education direction from Council, it became clear that achieving the direction to launch an education process that would share the history of Queen Victoria, the statue, and its impacts was beyond both the capability and competencies of municipal employees.

Developing a public education campaign about a colonial figure is complex and requires a sophisticated approach to ensure that any content developed is historically accurate not just from a euro-centric, colonial perspective, but reflecting the diverse experiences and histories of those negatively impacted by colonialism. Any public education campaign about the Queen, the statue, or its impacts would need to be co-developed by historians, educators and community leaders from Indigenous and racialized communities in order to present a fulsome history. The process of developing content would need to create space for a plurality of views without endorsing or legitimizing harm, or perpetuating erasure. It would also need to be completed in a culturally appropriate way that would ensure further harm is not perpetuated in the process of creating a fulsome history. Finally, a public education campaign is not appropriate for a topic of this magnitude or complexity, where there is the likelihood that such a campaign could cause further harm and where there is no evidence that it would be effective or impactful.

Further Review of Best Practices in Public Engagement

Following Ms. Pitter’s advice to move more slowly on considerations regarding the statue, staff paused any further public engagement and began new work to explore best practices for public engagement on historically controversial subjects, and best practices on public engagement in challenging contexts.

Since that time, staff have:

- Participated in a Bloomberg-Harvard Civic Engagement Program, which provided evidence-based and real-life learning on engaging on historically controversial subjects;

- Completed a best practice review on public engagement in challenging contexts;
- Consulted with other municipalities that have had direct experience with controversy over statues and monuments;
- Conducted a scan of municipalities that installed new public art, statues, monuments or other commemorative installations honouring Indigenous history and heritage; and,
- Completed a scan of other municipalities' comprehensive commemoration frameworks.

Based on new knowledge and understanding of best practices, proceeding with further engagement regarding the Queen Victoria statue is not an appropriate path forward. Engagement is not meaningful or appropriate when it causes harm. No matter how well-designed, no broad public engagement on the issue of the statue can avoid causing harm to Black, Indigenous and other racialized communities who are negatively impacted by the ongoing legacy of colonization; rather, it is far more likely, as evidenced by the experience of other municipalities, to create and deepen divisions in the community at large. It is for this reason that staff recommend no further action be taken on broad public engagement regarding the future of the statue.

Staffs' recommendation to take no further action on a broad public education campaign is similarly rooted in learning that highlights the complexity of such a recommendation as a stand-alone body of work. Any public education campaign must incorporate multiple perspectives and understandings, and go beyond a traditional euro-centric, colonial history or perspective. It is well beyond the expertise and scope of staff to develop educational material for such a complex and significant body of work. Further, the allocated budget and timeline associated with the initial report on this matter are insufficient for such a complex and emotionally charged topic.

Co-led, Co-designed Commemorative Installation

During the Witnessing Circle phase of engagement, the concept of commissioning a new, commemorative installation in Victoria Park was proposed. This is a suggestion that has also been raised in media reports, as well as in direct correspondence to the City. This is an option that was extensively researched as a proposed path forward, and there are several examples from other municipalities of the value and positive impact of such installations, which have served to strengthen relations with Indigenous communities and invited learning and dialogue on our shared histories and futures. Of note is [Niagara Parks' Landscape of Nations](#) and other installations across the Niagara (Lincoln, Thorold) region, and in Gravenhurst. These provide examples of successful processes for community co-led Indigenous public art and memorials that recognize Indigenous heritage and contributions.

It is therefore staffs' recommendation that the City explore the opportunity for a co-led, co-developed commemorative public art installation in Victoria Park that honours local Indigenous history, promotes an understanding of the impact of colonization, and can work to bring the community together in the spirit of reconciliation. It is important to note that, if Council supports this recommendation, such an undertaking must move forward explicitly within the context of reconciliation. This would require a pre-engagement phase to understand whether local Indigenous communities are supportive of a commemorative installation, and that they would support an evidence-based, co-led, co-design process to

move forward this significant body of work. Such a project would then need to be scoped appropriately to allow for the necessary time, and budget, to deliver such an installation. This pre-engagement will also take time, as relationships will need to be developed, and trust built, with those whose voices will be most crucial in advancing this work together.

STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:

This report supports **the delivery of core services.**

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

There are no financial implications associated with this report; however, it is important to note that the recommendation to refer the opportunity for a co-led, co-designed commemorative art installation in Victoria Park will have financial implications in a future budget year/years.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

If Council refers the exploration of a commemorative installation in Victoria Park to the Arts and Culture Action Plan, a co-led, co-designed project is necessary in order to meaningfully center community voices and build authentic relationships with those most impacted by the legacy of colonialism – Indigenous, Black and racialized communities. This would require a pre-engagement phase to understand whether local Indigenous communities are supportive of a commemorative installation, and that they would support an evidence-based, co-led, co-design process to move forward this significant body of work.

PREVIOUS REPORTS/AUTHORITIES:

- [COR-2022-253](#) Queen Victoria Statue – Considerations for Next Steps

APPROVED BY: Victoria Raab, General Manager, Corporate Services

ATTACHMENTS:

None.