

AIDS Memorial Meetings Summary Report

Barbara Hall Park Vision and Improvement Plan – Phase 1: Towards a Vision

City of Toronto – Parks, Forestry, and Recreation

April 2024

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Introduction

The City of Toronto is collaborating with the local Church-Wellesley Village community to develop a new vision and improvement plan for Barbara Hall Park. The objectives of the park vision and improvement plan are to enhance the park's function for everyday use and as a central gathering space for the City's 2SLGBTQ+ community; better accommodate passive and active uses, special events, and moments of reflection; and improve park maintenance and safety for all.

About this Report

This report summarizes a series of meetings and public workshops that were held to explore how members of the HIV/AIDS community would like the AIDS Memorial addressed through the Barbara Hall Park visioning process. These meetings took place between July and November of 2023. In November 2023, the City hosted one in-person workshop and one online workshop. The goal of these workshops was to facilitate a discussion with the HIV/AIDS community about the AIDS Memorial and test certain ideas that key stakeholders had suggested earlier in the process.

Meetings Summarized in this Report

1. AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) Poz Youth Group

Location: ACT Offices

Date: July 13th, 2023

Number of participants: Approx. 15

2. ACT Gay Men's Coffee Night

Location: ACT Offices

Date: October 11th, 2023

Number of participants: 4

3. Toronto HIV/AIDS Network

Location: Virtual

Date: October 19th, 2023

Time: 12:30 pm

Number of participants: Approx. 5

4. Casey House Staff

Location: Casey House

Date: October 20th, 2023

Number of participants: 4

5. AIDS Memorial Committee

Location: Virtual

Date: November 3rd, 2023

Number of participants: 3

5. In-Person Public Workshop

Location: The 519 Ballroom

Date: November 16th, 2023

Number of participants: 35

6. Online Public Workshop

Location: Virtual

Date: November 23rd, 2023

Number of participants: 23

What We Heard Summary

The following themes summarise the key feedback received about the AIDS Memorial during this phase of engagement across all meetings and workshops identified above.

“I think it’s OK to fix what doesn’t work, but my philosophy is that we should work with what we have.” – In-person workshop participant

The Memorial is sacred and should not be moved.

While some participants in our process were open to the idea of shifting the location of the Memorial within Barbara Hall Park, most who participated in the two public workshops were strongly opposed. We heard that, for many people who lived through the worst of the

AIDS epidemic, and especially those who have loved ones who are named on the Memorial, the Memorial is a sacred place akin to a war memorial. It's a place for remembering, grieving, and honouring people that society forgot. We also heard that, for many people, especially those who don't know where their loved ones are buried, the Memorial acts as a cemetery where they can go to visit their loved ones. These participants strongly felt that, like graves, memorials should be considered permanent and that this one should not be moved or altered in any significant way.

The Memorial should not be *changed* or *transformed* but it can be *enhanced* or *improved*.

Since the Memorial is sacred to many participants, they felt that it was not appropriate to use the word "change" when discussing its future. Instead, participants preferred words like "enhance" or "improve".

The Memorial must be accessible.

Participants across our meetings and workshops consistently identified accessibility as a top concern. The AIDS epidemic is now over 40 years old and those who survived and were directly impacted by it have gotten older as well. The overall design of Barbara Hall Park was called "hostile", particularly to people who use accessibility devices. Participants reported that pathways leading to the Memorial are too narrow and meandering and that walking through the park is particularly difficult in the winter due to the sloped pathways and because of a lack of consistent snow clearance. In addition, the font used on the Memorial's plaques is too small for many people to read. Participants encouraged the park's designers to aim for higher standards of accessibility than required under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA). Ideas for improving the accessibility of the Memorial included wider pathways, the incorporation of braille on the plaques, additional handrails, better lighting, and consideration for the experiences of neurodiverse people.

Maintenance of the Memorial is a major concern.

Participants across our meetings and workshops also consistently identified maintenance as a top concern and a priority for the Memorial into the future. One participant noted that not properly maintaining the Memorial is to not properly honour those who died. Winter maintenance and summer maintenance of the grass, planting beds, and greenery were identified as particular priorities. Participants also noted that the Memorial is regularly vandalised and used as a toilet. They therefore recommended a focus on maintenance as a key principle of the future park design, especially through the incorporation of design elements that could be easily maintained.

“Safety” is also a concern.

“Safety” is used here in quotations because participants expressed nuanced but also very contrary views on this issue. Many participants expressed that visiting the Memorial makes them feel unsafe and more than one called the environment that the Memorial is in “inappropriate”. Some youth participants called the park “sketchy” and noted it felt dark. Other participants questioned the use of the word “safe”, noting it's a relative term and that, for many people, the park is their only safe space. Some participants questioned whether discussions around safety were coded and whether what people really want is to push vulnerable people out of the park to make room for more “desirable” people. The term “gentrification” was used several times concerning the overall park planning process. Participants on both sides of this discussion often agreed that better lighting and park activations were both desirable approaches to improving the overall sense of safety.

The Memorial is running out of space for additional names.

As the number of names on the Memorial has grown over time, the space to accommodate new names has shrunk, causing concern among some that the Memorial will soon run out of space for new names. At the same time, we heard that as the Memorial's visitors age, the relatively small size of the font used to display names has begun to pose accessibility challenges. Some participants feel that an opportunity exists to expand the Memorial in line with its original design by adding additional pillars and using some of the extra space to increase the size of the font used to record people's names. Some participants cited barriers to waiting to get names engraved in metal and were open to using technology like screens or projections when thinking about creating space for additional names. During these discussions, The 519 staff stated that they are working towards a strategy to ensure room is available for new plaques on the current pillars.

There is an opportunity to do more to contextualise the AIDS Memorial.

Participants generally agreed that the purpose and meaning of the AIDS Memorial could be better contextualized, at least through the installation of prominent identifying signage so that visitors can be made aware of its existence. Some participants felt that there is an opportunity to go even further by incorporating interpretive elements in the park that tell the story of HIV/AIDS in Toronto, including the history of the Memorial and the stories of the people named on it. Participants felt that this could provide an opportunity to further honour the people named on the Memorial. Some of the ideas shared for achieving this include the incorporation of interpretive signage or public art, the use of QR codes to direct people to online resources or an interactive storytelling platform, or the incorporation of digital screens or multimedia installations. The NYC AIDS Memorial Instagram account (@theaidsmemorial) was cited as one example of how the lives of people who died from AIDS could be honoured.

The AIDS Memorial doesn't resonate with younger people living with HIV.

Youth who participated from ACT's Poz Youth Group came from diverse backgrounds, and a significant proportion of them were newcomers. These youth expressed that the Memorial was not directly relevant to them and so they did not feel particularly connected to it. For most of them, it's not reflective of their own experiences with HIV and does not memorialize the people in their lives who have passed away from AIDS outside of Canada. These youth talked about "changing times" and "cultural shifts". They see an opportunity for the Memorial to have a broader appeal to a new generation of people, many of whom are not from Toronto. They also see an opportunity to recognize more than just the people who have died, but also to bridge generations, and to inspire new ones. One participant cited a museum built in Rwanda after the genocide that celebrates the people who survived and continue to fight for peace and justice. These participants wanted to see artistic and digital elements added to the park that are complementary to the Memorial, that are hopeful, and that celebrate the lives of people currently living with HIV.

There is a sense the Memorial could benefit from community stewardship.

In the views of some participants, nobody is responsible for the Memorial in a meaningful way. One solution offered to address this was the idea of greater community stewardship of the Memorial. While The 519 has long stewarded the addition of names to the Memorial, and supports maintenance of the site, we heard that community stewards could play a role in coordinating programming to get people involved in taking care of the Memorial, which could strengthen the wider community's connection to it. They could also develop programming to educate the public about the history of the Memorial and the early AIDS epidemic. Providing clarity to the broader community around the City's roles and responsibilities for maintenance and stewardship was also mentioned.

Consult widely.

Participants consistently wanted to know who the City was engaging on the issue of the Memorial to ensure that the broad stakeholder groups who have an interest in it were reflected in these conversations. They sought to ensure that the City was engaging the family members of the people named on the Memorial, the people involved in its creation, vulnerable community members, people of colour, and First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people, especially those who identify as 2SLGBTQ+.

How We're Addressing Your Feedback

We are no longer considering moving or changing the Memorial in any significant way.

City staff heard loud and clear that the Memorial should not be moved. As a result, we will no longer consider shifting the location of the Memorial within the park. We will also not be proposing any significant changes to the Memorial, except for landscaping and accessibility improvements. We also understood that a future expansion of the Memorial according to its original design is acceptable.

We are proposing changes to the Guiding Principles.

Based on what we heard overall through the series of meetings and workshops summarized in this report, we propose adding two new Guiding Principles to help guide the park design. These are:

Commemorate: The park design should continue to be a place to reflect on and mourn the lives that have been lost to AIDS while also celebrating people living with HIV/AIDS today.

Future Proof: The park design should allow for the potential future expansion of the AIDS Memorial through the addition of new pillars.

We are proposing changes to the Big Moves.

Throughout the first phase of engagement for this project, City staff proposed and discussed with stakeholders several Big Moves related to enhancements to the AIDS Memorial. These included:

- Enhance the Memorials [AIDS & Trans] to make them more prominent and more accessible
- Transform the AIDS Memorial in a way that also celebrates people living with HIV
- Enhance the AIDS Memorial

However, based on what we heard overall through the series of meetings and workshops summarized in this report, we are now proposing advancing only the first of the Big Moves listed above.

We are also proposing two additional Big Moves:

- Incorporate new elements in the park that celebrate people living with HIV/AIDS
- Develop a Community Stewardship Plan for the AIDS Memorial

Next Steps

The proposed directions described in the section above will be confirmed in a final Phase 1 survey. This survey will mark the end of engagement for Phase 1 of the overall park visioning and improvement planning process. A phase summary report will be published at the conclusion of the phase.

The City is now in the process of hiring an external design team to assist with the next phase of work. Once this team has been onboarded, we will continue engaging the community on the development of design options and the finalization of a preferred plan for the park.