

Development Award Sparks Outrage among Aboriginals

By Edward Hill
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A South Pender Island resort that is under criminal investigation for destroying a Coast Salish village site was awarded for excellence in development, prompting outrage from aboriginal groups.

The Urban Development Institute, a non-profit association for the development community, granted the 2005 Award of Excellence for "Best Resort Development" to Poets Cove Resort and Spa in June.

"Poets Cove is one of the worst desecrations of an aboriginal burial ground by development in the recent history of Canada," said Robert Morales, chief negotiator for the Ladysmith-based Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group. "Our First Nations are solemnly disgusted by the public tribute to a corporation that has destroyed our national heritage, violates provincial law, and profited from the destruction of our ancestors' graves."

The two companies that own Poets Cove and developer Bill James are facing charges under the Heritage Conservation Act, and will be in a Victoria court January 2006. The developers allegedly "damaged a burial place with archaeological and historical value" and excavated a site "that contained evidence of human habitation before 1846."

The treaty group is asking UDI to revoke the award and publicly apologize. "Those who vandalize and despoil the cemeteries of any other minority group in Canada receive civic disgrace, not public acclamation. The award to Poets Cove is an insult to First Nations," Morales added.

But the resort will hang on to the accolade for the time being. UDI executive director Maureen Enser said it is premature and inappropriate to strip the award, considering Poets Cove could be vindicated in the courts.

Enser said the award takes in the scope of the project, including mitigating First Nation's concerns and the difficulty of the development, but that at the time, the institute was unaware of legal action. "Lots of positive things made us consider Poets Cove, and we will try to be fair, but it is premature to do anything right now," she said.

The Coast Salish site is estimated to be at least 5,200 years old. It was well known as a major archaeological deposit, and in the 1980's, university researchers excavated in the area, finding thousands of artifacts, elaborate burial chambers and human remains.

"It is an extensive site. I've never seen anything quite like it," said Eric McLay, an archaeologist for the Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group.

McLay and Morales investigated the Poets Cove construction site in 2003, and found mounds of cultural deposits had been unceremoniously dumped on the tennis courts to make way for a pool. The site erupted in further controversy earlier this year, when the resort brought in mechanical screening machines – the same kind used at the Robert Pickton pig farm – to filter out artifacts and remains.

"That was not respectful and really upset the Elders," McLay said. "That such a place can receive an award saying it respects the sensitivities of the environment is unbelievable."