

Resort Acrimony Eased with Screenings, Healing Ceremony

By Gerard Young
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The developer of a Pender Island resort and various First Nations have settled their differences on how to deal with what may be an ancient aboriginal burial ground.

After some acrimony and a couple of weeks of discussions, the resort developer and First Nations have agreed to a joint screening of all material uncovered during excavation.

Also, the Poets Cove management team will sponsor a spiritual and healing ceremony next week for spirits disturbed as well as for safety and peace during construction.

"It is very respectful for those who have gone before us," Tsawout Chief Allan Claxton said Tuesday. "When they dug there, they disturbed their spirits."

He sees the agreement as precedent-setting and hopes it is the beginning of a new relationship with developers, he said.

"I think we can turn this into a positive -- working together," Claxton said.

The developer also plans to include, in the resort amenities, information on archeological finds as well as the spiritual elements and history of local First Nations.

Details of how that will be displayed have yet to be worked out.

Earlier this month, the RCMP shut down construction for a few days at the Poets Cove development at Bedwell Harbour after a complaint by First Nations.

A human bone was found during excavation, leading several First Nations to charge a Coast Salish archeological settlement had been destroyed.

Aside from police, a provincial archaeologist as well as one hired by the developer were involved.

First Nations are believed to have lived, fished and hunted in the Bedwell Harbour area and other parts of the island for thousands of years.

The screening process is expected to take three to six months and will begin after the developer gains an amendment to the existing archeological site alteration permit under the provincial Heritage Conservation Act.

Developer Bill James was pleased the sides were able to resolve the issue and he committed to his construction crews being more sensitive and careful when digging.

"We've made mistakes, we're acknowledging that," he said, adding the errors were "innocent" and not meant to upset the First Nations.

He and his partners look forward to working with the First Nations whose ancestral homes include Pender Island as well as the Saanich Peninsula.

He also believes the resolution to the problem will benefit the resort and the First Nations, drawing attention to what the development has to offer as well as the aboriginal culture.

Among the First Nations involved are the Tseycum and the Hul'qumi'num treaty group, which represents six Coast Salish First Nations and some 6,000 people.

Bedwell Harbour has had a marine and resort for about 50 years but the Poets Cove development will add a new dimension with a marine centre, villa and cottages that will be ready for guests in June.

The development will be built in phases with a restaurant, bistro and 22-room lodge set for completion this summer.

"It's full speed ahead," James said.