



Highway would cut key first nations archeological sites

Construction of the South Fraser Perimeter Road will have a destructive impact on two of B.C.'s oldest and most important first nations archeological sites and the project will likely require the disinterment of ancient human remains.

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Construction of the South Fraser Perimeter Road will have a destructive impact on two of B.C.'s oldest and most important first nations archeological sites and the project will likely require the disinterment of ancient human remains.

The road, which runs 40 km from the Deltaport interchange in Delta to the 176th Street interchange at the Trans-Canada Highway, is a centrepiece of the provincial government's Gateway highway expansion project.

Almost 30 per cent of the road's proposed alignment runs through land rated as having high archeological potential, according to field studies conducted as part of the project's environmental assessment.

The province in 2007 proposed some changes to the original alignment of the road and an elevated roadway near the Glenrose Cannery and St. Mungo sites -- both near the southern foot of the Alex Fraser Bridge -- to reduce the disturbance of known archeological deposits, but the exact boundary of the deposits is not known.

The Gateway project will employ an "accidental discovery protocol" if unexpected artifacts or human remains are found during construction.

The government's archeology branch has recommended archeological excavations of undisturbed deposits where the alignment of the road or the footings for an elevated road cannot be changed. St. Mungo will sustain the most damage due to construction, according to ministry documents.

The Ministry of Transportation is working with the Musqueam and a handful of other first nations to develop a site management plan. The Musqueam office refused comment on the plan.

First nations activity along the Fraser River has been so widespread and intensive over the millennia that the banks of the river virtually form one unending archaeological site in much of the Lower Mainland. But half a dozen sites in the path of the new road have been identified as having significant scientific merit.

UBC professor emeritus H.G. Matson said the Glenrose Cannery site is among the most important sites in B.C., with undisturbed deposits from three distinct cultural periods dating back more than 9,000 years.

Matson participated in excavations at Glenrose during the early 1970s.

"Glenrose is particularly important because there are very few sites of that age," he said.

"I don't know of any other site that has as long a sequence of occupation," Matson said. "That's nearly 6,000 years."

Unique specimens of bone and antler tools from the old cordilleran period have been recovered in earlier excavations at the site, preserved by a layer of midden shell material left by more recent inhabitants. The site's first occupants were there between 3,300 and 9,000 years ago.

The bone fragments provide valuable information about the diet of the earliest settlers and the seasonal use of the site. Matson said the evidence suggests the area was first used mainly in the springtime by people who hunted elk, deer and seal, predating the widespread "stored salmon economy" that Europeans encountered upon their arrival to the West Coast. The salmon economy evolved when larger populations could not be supported by hunting alone.

"The proposed SFPR will impact disturbed and possibly intact archeological deposits including human remains in the Glenrose Cannery site," warned the environment assessment application prepared by the ministry of transportation.

The neighbouring St. Mungo site contains human burials and shows evidence of three distinct cultural periods, including a prosperous fishing village that shows considerable signs of wealth and power. The report notes that such sites are rare in the Lower Mainland. The province may protect a portion of the St. Mungo site as a park or reserve as part of its mitigation program.

The science of excavation and knowledge about B.C.'s ancient peoples has progressed so much in the 35 years since Matson last dug at Glenrose that he believes much more could be learned today, if the area is not disturbed by the construction process.

"Glenrose has told us so much that I am sure that it will tell us much more in the future," Matson said.

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