

Native American site leaves Miami in quandary

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As more Native American archaeological sites are being uncovered around the United States, the findings are posing difficult questions for the cities where they are found.

In Miami, a major prehistoric Native American village has been discovered at a downtown site where developers plan to construct a movie theater, condos and hotel building.

The discovery has pitted developers against archaeologists and historic preservationists who want the find preserved in its entirety. Developers say the public is better served by removing a portion and putting it on display while continuing with construction.

Little is still known about Native American architecture but more sites are being found with advances in technology and a better understanding of the subtle markers that remain.

In a vacant lot between gleaming hotels in downtown Miami are a series of holes carved into the bedrock that form eight circles.

At first glance, the site seems like an eyesore. But it's here where archaeologists say they have uncovered a major prehistoric Native American village, one of the largest and earliest examples of urban planning ever uncovered in North America.

It's also where a movie theater, condos and 34-story hotel are expected to

be built.

The discovery has pitted developers against archaeologists and historic preservationists. The dispute comes as an increasing number of Native American sites are being uncovered around the country with advances in technology and a greater understanding of the subtle markers left behind to look for. The discoveries pose difficult questions for cities such as Miami that must decide whether it is best to preserve the remains of an ancient society or, often times, destroy it in hopes of revitalizing a new one.

"Let's be honest with each other," said Eugene Stearns, the attorney representing MDM Development Group, which owns the property and is eager to move forward with construction. "Every great city is built on the shards of a former great city."

At its height, archaeologist Bob Carr estimated as many as 2,000 people lived in the Tequesta village, starting around 500 B.C. It likely extended a quarter mile along the Miami River and then wrapped around Biscayne Bay.

Much of the village consisted of thatched, hut-like buildings the Tequestas, one of South Florida's earliest tribes, built by digging holes with clam shells into the soft limestone, and then inserting pine logs to hold floors, walls and roofs.

Because of the materials used—straw, wood—the only remnants of the buildings are the postholes, today still forming up to 40-foot (12-meter) circles in the blackened bedrock.

MDM has proposed carving out a section of the limestone containing the circle formations and placing it on display in a public plaza.

Preservations, however, say removing a piece of architecture isn't like moving a painting from one museum to another.

"The idea that you would carve out a chunk and move it to some other place and put it into exhibition sounds strange to me and sad," said Mark Jarzombek, associate dean of the Massachusetts Institute for Technology's School of Architecture and Planning. "These places are very site specific. There's a reason why they made this village or town there which has to do with orientation, landscape, access to rivers."

MDM has spent \$3 million conducting an archaeological review and is now anxious to continue construction. Stearn said all of the planned commercial space has been leased and half of the residential units have been sold.

Miami isn't the only city grappling with how best to preserve an ancient site while allowing development to advance. Nationwide, Native American sites are being discovered at a quickening pace. "Archaeology is really going through a bit of a golden era now with uncovering these sights," Jarzombek said.

In California, where as many as 1 million Native Americans may have once lived, Dave Singleton with the Native American Heritage Commission said he receives reports from county coroner offices regarding Native American remains about once every 10 days.

Construction crews have unearthed burial grounds, artifacts and villages in rural, desert areas to downtown Los Angeles. Any time remains are found in California, construction is halted while an archaeological review is done and a descendant identified.

With a few exceptions, however, construction has eventually resumed.

Hundreds of tools and other artifacts, along with possible burial sites, were found at a planned 250-megawatt solar energy project east of the Coachella Valley in 2011, slated to be one of the largest in the U.S. Tribal leaders said federal officials had deemed the findings "unprecedented."

Construction was temporarily halted but later allowed to continue. A mitigation plan that included an extensive study and public outreach was developed.

Singleton said the Native American groups are not opposed to development, but they object to the generation of plants and transmission lines that go through burial grounds and destroy sacred sites.

Miami-Dade County archaeologist Jeff Ransom, however, plans to recommend full preservation at a city meeting Friday and, if the committee members agree, MDM could be forced to redesign the site.

Ransom would like to see the huts and village reconstructed, and he believes the site could be turned into a viable heritage tourism destination.

Miami is a city vying to become an international destination not just for its nightlife and beaches but also its art and culture. Revitalizing the city's downtown with a new museum district, shops and restaurants has been seen as a central part of that.

There are some Native American within urban areas that have been successfully preserved. A Hohokam mound next to a hospital near Phoenix was purchased by the city of Mesa in 1988 and stabilized by a team of archaeologists. It is now a 6-acre (2.4-hectare) cultural park.

Developers in Miami contend it would be difficult to preserve the site and promote it as an area for tourists to visit because it is on soft limestone rock, has no drainage and is corroding from rain and pollution. They also note the site is prime real estate that would cost the city about \$100 million to purchase.

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