

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

County error delays work at DeMille set

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Archaeologist John Parker works at the buried set of "The Ten Commandments" in 1990.
SANTA BARBARANEWS-PRESS FILE

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A mistake by the Santa Barbara County Planning Department will delay a documentary filmmaker's plans to rescue aging relics of the epic 1923 silent film "The Ten Commandments" from the Guadalupe Dunes.

For more than two decades, Montebello filmmaker Peter Brosnan has been laboring to gain funding and approval to create "The Lost City of DeMille," an expansive documentary telling of the fate of director Cecil B. DeMille's famed "City of Pharaohs" movie set.

DeMille's set, which included four 20-ton statues of the Pharaoh Ramses, as well as almost two dozen sphinxes, 30 chariots and a temple that reached 120 feet into the sky, was buried underneath the sands by the director almost nine decades ago, eventually becoming largely lost to the elements and looters.

This January, with the necessary funding of nearly \$300,000 finally in hand, Mr. Brosnan received a permit exemption from the Planning and Development Department for his proposed salvage operation at the protected archaeological site.

Work was set to begin Oct. 5 with a team of six to eight professional archaeologists using hand trowels and brushes to recover small pieces of plaster and other cultural material related to the silent film, said to Dr. John Parker, an archaeologist on the project.

But on Sept. 30, "The county says it made a mistake and the project came to a halt," said Frances Romero, executive director of the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes Center. "The crew was laid off 72 hours before work was to begin. Imagine how devastating that is."

On Tuesday, Ms. Romero and a group of the film's supporters pleaded with the county Board of Supervisors for permit relief.

The Dune Center, she said, has been involved for more than 10 years in the project. As the contract administrator, the nonprofit stood to earn \$20,000 from the project, "during a time when funding is extremely sparse."

"Losing \$20,000 will cause us to close our doors," Ms. Romero said of the center whose education program reaches about 9,000 students annually.

In a private discussion with county executives following the supervisors' meeting, Ms. Romero, and Mr. Brosnan by teleconference, got the county to agree to expedite -- at no cost to the filmmaker -- the now-required film permit and Coastal Development permit.

Glenn Russell, director of Planning and Development, said his department determined that a grading permit was not necessary, but based on the project description, the others were required.

"We made a mistake earlier this year in exempting their project and they relied on that," Dr. Russell said Tuesday afternoon. "This is a project that is obviously really good for the county and the community of Guadalupe and we want to make sure they get it done. We feel obligated to process those permits," at no cost.

Even with the decision, Ms. Romero and others say it may be a struggle to get the six-week project finished before winter storms set in. The documentarians are also up against next year's March 1-to-Sept. 30 nesting season for the threatened western snowy plover, which would prohibit work on the set excavation. That could delay the project until October 2012.

Dr. Russell said Ms. Romero and others had asked if there was some way the county could simply "render a decision" to move forward.

"There was really no way that kind of decision could take place," Dr. Russell explained. "This was their quickest path to getting the permit."

With various hearing times and appeal periods, the permit could get to the California Coastal Commission by mid-November, and Dr. Russell anticipates a Coastal Development permit could be issued by Dec. 2.

"In the scheme of things, they had hoped to start work in October," said Dr. Russell. "Now they'll begin work in December. It may work out just fine. These things do happen, and now we're addressing it. ... It's not exactly what they wanted, but they're willing to go with it."

Dr. Parker, the archaeologist, told the county that most of the artifacts are at, or near, the dune surface, and that less than 50 cubic yards of sand will have to be moved.

"By way of example, a family building a sand castle on the beach would move more sand and do more environmental damage than will occur during this project," Dr. Parker said in a letter to the supervisors.

Third District Supervisor Doreen Farr, who represents Guadalupe, said the project was very important for both the county and the small town.

"I'm quite disappointed in what happened," she said during the board meeting. "Obviously there was a very serious lack of communication, and miscommunication, with them and the public and between departments. Staff is working to rectify the situation. ... We're working hard to make this happen."

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