

Cecil B. DeMille's "10 Commandments" film set may remain buried in Guadalupe Dunes

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Aging relics long-sought by a documentary filmmaker may remain forever buried by the sands of time, despite Santa Barbara County's pledge to expedite the permit process for the excavation of the famed Cecil B. DeMille "10 Commandments" film set in the Guadalupe Dunes.

During its meeting today, the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors is expected to hear an update on the excavation project of Montebello filmmaker Peter Brosnan, who learned earlier this month that the county revoked a permit exemption for his project, "The Lost City of DeMille," saying it erred in not requiring both Coastal Development and Film permits.

Though county planning officials say the permits could be in hand by early December, Mr. Brosnan believes his excavation hopes -- and the expected finale for his film -- are over, after 27 years of striving to bring the extravagant set into public view.

"The project is dead for this year, certainly, and quite certainly for next year as well," Mr. Brosnan said. "Twenty years ago we thought we were going to get this done. There was a two-year delay with the permitting people. They finally decided we didn't need permits. By then, all our funding sources vanished. We finally got funding back, and 72 hours before we were to start, this happened."

Planning and Development Director Glenn Russell told Mr. Brosnan via e-mail that he was sorry the filmmaker has decided not to move forward in 2011, though both sides tried to come to an agreement following last week's supervisorial meeting.

I understand why," Dr. Russell wrote. "We will continue processing your permits so that they will be in place when you decide to move forward."

Though clearly exasperated, Mr. Brosnan says he remains grateful to the county for agreeing to expedite, at no cost, the permits. But the heartbreak of perhaps losing key artifacts to the elements and looters is evident.

"There are so many questions and many options," Mr. Brosnan said. "The county expedited the process but I don't know if it's enough. Twelve people are out of work. We don't have an archeologist. There are a lot of questions on whether we can proceed. I don't know if all of us have the energy to proceed. And quite honestly, I don't trust the county."

The latest development also led to the resignation of Dr. John Parker, the film's lead archeologist for the past 21 years.

"I've had it," Dr. Parker said Monday. "This was the breaking point."

With the revocation of the permit, Dr. Parker said 12 crewmembers were laid off and the agreement to rent a lab facility in a storefront on Guadalupe's Main Street was cancelled, as were reservations for hotel rooms.

Dr. Parker's greatest sorrow is for what may be lost if the excavation does not happen.

"This site is a very historic site," Dr. Parker explained, saying it was the first biblical epic ever filmed. "This particular site is the last remaining silent movie set from the 1920s. The rest of them are gone. This is it. This is the last remaining one. The only reason it exists is because DeMille thought he was destroying it by burying it in sand. He ended up preserving it."

Some of the artifacts that are still buried, he said, include remains of the lunches eaten by actors, make-up mirrors and large-scale Egyptian-style sets.

"It's kind of like a time capsule from 1923 that no one's ever opened and looked at," he said.

Another concern was that the loss of the project meant a \$20,000 financial blow to the nonprofit Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes Center, which was the project manager. Late Monday, an "X-agenda" item was added to today's agenda for the supervisors by 3rd District Supervisor Doreen Farr, seeking approval for a grant in that amount for the center.

Another main issue that caused concern, according to Dr. Parker and Mr. Brosnan, involved an unresolved monitoring issue with at least one Native American resident in San Luis Obispo County that was apparently one of the reasons the permit exemption was revoked. The person involved, who apparently complained about the lack of a Native American monitor for the project, wanted a job on the excavation, Dr. Parker contends. The DeMille set, he said, is not a prehistoric site and does not require a Native American monitor in his opinion.

A legal representative from the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians told the Board of Supervisors last week that the tribe supported the project and would provide a monitor on the excavation free of cost.

A letter about the project was delivered to the county Planning Department on Monday and signed by Chumash Chairman Vincent Armenta.

"In regards to this project, the Business Committee has consulted with the city of Guadalupe and determined that a Native American monitor would completely mitigate any risk of encountering Chumash historic artifacts or remains on or near the project site," Mr. Armenta wrote.

Supervisor Farr, whose district now includes Guadalupe, expressed disappointment about how the permit process took place, but said the county staff is working hard to rectify the error. It may only mean a delay of six to eight weeks, she said.

The project, she said, is valuable and of great importance to the city of Guadalupe.

"I'm certainly doing everything I can to work with staff and the CEO's office to try and resolve this," Ms. Farr said. "I would hope the principals in the project would go ahead and continue the process with the permits, in case they change their minds in the coming year. Then they're in the

position to begin."

Dr. Parker said even if he decided to stay involved, it would take him a month to get re-organized, hire a new crew and make all the rental agreements again. With permits not expected until December, that means he'd be starting work in January -- typically a rough weather time in the North County. At the end of March, the nesting season for the federally threatened western snowy plover would stop all work until next Sept. 30.

I don't have the energy," Dr. Parker said. "It won't be October 2012. I don't even believe it can happen then. I put 21 years in this, to see it start up and fail, start up and fail. We had the permits and the funding and to see the county yank permits 24 hours before we began work; I can't take that. It's not something I can handle, or deal with."

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