

OUR VIEW

Archeological sites are part of our heritage

Private property owners shouldn't be forced to pay to preserve them

FEW BRITISH Columbians object to efforts to preserve our archeological heritage, as the fascination with the province's earliest habitants is definitely widespread.

But when an archeological site is discovered on an individual's private property, any subsequent scientific exploration of the area should be shouldered by the province, not the property owner. Unfortunately for Bill Vandermale, who is trying to renovate his home on The Esplanade in Oak Bay, that's not how the law reads.

Vandermale's troubles began when a couple of archeologists strolled past his property and saw a pile of dirt excavated for the renovation to his house. They concluded that the building site might hide a prehistoric trove.

The archeologists phoned the archeology branch of the Ministry of Culture, who in turn phoned Vandermale and told him to stop work until the site had been

examined. The kicker was that Vandermale would have to pay for the subsequent archeological investigation, and being advised to get several estimates didn't ease the pain much.

What's particularly annoying to Vandermale is that he wasn't told by Oak Bay officials in advance that he might get stuck with the bill for an archeological dig. He got the impression that it was the province's fault for not telling Oak Bay the location of potential prehistory sites.

Not so, said the province, insisting that maps locating archeological hot spots were issued to all Capital Region municipalities.

Yes, we got an electronic map, replied Oak Bay, but it doesn't align with our global positioning system data. However, the village added that it's trying to ensure no one else runs into a similar problem in Oak Bay.

All of which is of very little help to Bill Vandermale and won't do much for other people wanting to add an extension to their homes, build a garage or any of the myriad other improvements homeowners like to make to their homes. Is rototilling a new garden risky?

Perhaps the most insulting comment in the whole affair came from archeologist Grant Keddie of the Royal B.C., who suggested it's common sense that the person destroying the site should be the one to pay for it.

Common sense suggests that if the province believes such sites should not be destroyed, why allow building on them at all? If what's on the site is so precious, why not expropriate it?

Hmmm. Could it be that government cutbacks have severely curtailed the funding available for archeological digs, and the policy of making private property owners pay up is a make-work scheme for archeologists?

Although citizens are obliged to report artifacts to authorities, a great many property owners are loath to do so when they know it could cost them several thousand dollars and considerable delay of their project.

How many precious finds have been quickly and quietly bulldozed under by developers to avoid delaying or even stopping a project?

The present law and its implementation is unfair to property owners and likely causes the destruction of more archeological artifacts than it preserves.

The province should accept its responsibility for archeological sites and, at the very least, pay for the cost of any archeological digs. A good case could be made for compensating property owners and yes, even developers, for any costs and delays caused by such digs.