

# Byway project straddles past, future

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Archaeological analysis begins

SANDPOINT -- A retinue of archaeologists will be deployed along Sand Creek on Monday to begin probing the area for historic and prehistoric artifacts in preparation for the U.S. Highway 95 bypass.

"There will be artifacts out there," assures Robert Weaver, principal research historian for the Environmental History Co., which is conducting the cultural resources component of the Sand Creek Byway project.

The path of the highway realignment project through Sandpoint bisects the city's original town site and parallels railroad tracks pioneered with the help of Chinese labor. The area was also utilized by native people for thousands of years because of its proximity to Lake Pend Oreille and prehistoric travel and trade routes.

The cultural resources work is expected to last throughout the month. Those with questions about the archaeological evaluation can find answers at the Idaho Transportation Department's project office, located at 202 North Second Ave.

Since the realignment project utilizes federal highway dollars, it is subject to the National Historic Preservation Act and other regulations to determine the impacts on Sandpoint's cultural heritage.

Archaeological testing will follow a research plan approved by the Idaho State Historical Society, the Kootenai and Kalispel tribes and other state and federal agencies.

Three methods will be employed during this phase of the cultural resources evaluation. Archaeologists will use hand shovels to dig rectangular test pits. There will also be narrow trench excavations to remove fill placed over a historic grade and underwater "vibrocoring" in Sand Creek. The latter involves driving a pipe into the creek bed to extract core samples for examination.

From June to August, archaeologists will consult with authorities on the results of the earlier phase and develop plans for artifact recovery. Artifact recovery is scheduled to occur in the fall. The results of the project will then be made public.

State highway officials and project designers plan to secure the remaining permits and finish right of way acquisition while the archaeological evaluation runs its course. Bidding for the project is tentatively slated for fall, which would likely push the start of construction to the 2007 season.

For their part, archaeologists will be continually asking themselves is whether an item should be left in place or recovered and stored at the University of Idaho. Minor items which have been jostled out of their archaeological context might not make the cut, while undisturbed finds might because they lend themselves to accurate interpretation.

"The question is whether it adds to the cultural record," said Weaver.

No find -- not even the discovery of the mythical Pend Oreille Paddler or missing Teamsters leader Jimmy Hoffa -- will upend development of the byway, according to Weaver. Whatever is discovered, including burial sites, can be unearthed and saved for posterity.

"There's nothing that's going to stop the project -- even if we found another King Tut," Weaver said.