

Finding a resting place for the Gabrieleno-Tongva ancestors

By Kristin S. Agostoni Staff Writer
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Robert Dorame walked away from the neat rows of condominiums and town houses and followed the edge of a soccer field toward the Westchester Bluffs.

As an archeologist guided him along the base of the hillside, Dorame paused and looked out over the plants lining a drainage channel.

It was in this spot roughly four years ago that archeologists began unearthing hundreds of remains and burial artifacts from his Gabrieleno-Tongva ancestors.

As the master-planned community of Playa Vista took shape between Westchester and Marina del Rey, the remains and other artifacts were carefully uncovered, stowed away and cataloged for a future reburial - over the objections of Dorame and other American Indians.

This spring, however, they will finally see their ancestors put in a secure resting place close to where they were discovered.

Playa Vista and its archeological firm, working under a permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and a pact with the Corps and the state Office of Historic Preservation among others, have planned a reburial in June, at least two years sooner than anticipated.

At a meeting last month before the California Native American Heritage Commission, where Dorame and others had turned out to complain that delaying the reburial was undignified, Playa Vista attorney George Mihlsten announced the process could begin within the next several months.

In a statement issued later, Playa Vista officials said

"we appreciate the desire of the Native American community to have the human remains and associated items reinterred as promptly as possible" and that "we were pleased the Army Corps supports reinterment in the June 2008 time frame."

For Dorame - who had enlisted support from Los Angeles City Councilman Bill Rosendahl, local environmental groups and the commission - it took too long to get to this point.

"It is not part of our spirit to keep Indian remains out of the ground that long," said Dorame, who is a member of the Gabrieleno-Tongva Indians of California, one of several tribes that traces its lineage back to the Los Angeles Basin's original inhabitants.

The discovery several years ago devolved into a "horrible ordeal" as the remains were unearthed and placed in a secure site in another part of the development," he said.

It led to struggles with Playa Vista, the archeological firm and other Gabrieleno-Tongva descendants.

But as the state-appointed Most Likely Descendent - a title that gives him a role in where the remains will be put to rest - the 59-year-old Bellflower man said his "sole object" is to see them reburied close to where they were discovered.

"It's about protecting cultural resources and making people aware and educating them," Dorame said.

The Gabrieleno-Tongva people have a rich history on the land now known as Playa Vista and throughout the Los Angeles region.

The name Gabrieleno comes from the San Gabriel Mission, where European settlers put members of the tribe to work and forcefully tried to convert them to Christianity. Tongva is the American Indian name that means "people of the earth."

Long before aerospace mogul Howard Hughes paved a runway across the land where Playa Vista homes, offices and retailers are rising - the same land once used for cattle grazing - the area attracted human settlement for thousands of years. American Indians were drawn to what was then Ballona Lagoon, a rich estuarine environment fed by Ballona and Centinela creeks, Playa Vista historical documents state.

A history survey prepared in 1991 indicates that archeologists expected to find several areas of cultural significance as work proceeded for the development - just as Indian remains and artifacts have been uncovered at sites across Southern California.

But the 2003 Playa Vista discovery stands out because of its sheer size, archeologists say.

Although American Indian remains and artifacts have been recovered in other parts of the community spanning Jefferson Boulevard from Lincoln Boulevard to Centinela Avenue, officials say the vast majority of the burial features were uncovered in a roughly 35-by-35-foot area at the base of the bluffs.

Donn Grenda, president of the archeological firm Statistical Research Inc., which has been working at the site for years, said it is believed most of those remains date to the late 1700s, around the time of Spanish influence.

His firm has identified 386 burial features in total, Grenda said, and 372 came from the one site.

"There are diseases that came with Spanish contact," he said, which could explain why so many American Indians were buried together in such a small site.

Along with human remains, Grenda said archeologists also found religious items and other grave artifacts, which will be reburied in the same manner in which they were recovered.

"It is a very large cemetery, what we consider a cemetery," said Wendy Giddens Teeter, curator of archeology at the Fowler Museum of Cultural History at UCLA.

"It spans several thousand years, so obviously it's extremely important not only to the Tongva community, but to the scientific community," she said.

Under state law, the county coroner must be notified if human remains are found. If they are identified as American Indian, the Native American Heritage Commission must be contacted, and a Most Likely Descendent is appointed.

At Playa Vista, a so-called programmatic agreement was put in place in 1991 with the developers, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the Army Corps, the state preservation officer and American Indian representatives.

The pact, which was renewed in 2001, set out procedures that need to be followed before Indian remains and artifacts could be reburied - which is the factor officials from Playa Vista and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers attribute to the delay.

The "detailed research protocol" mandated by federal law and administered by the corps "stipulates the comprehensive analysis that must be conducted before the reburial can occur," the Playa Vista statement said.

"We have been working hard with state and federal regulatory agencies to complete the analytic process, so the Army Corps will permit a respectful reburial that can begin as soon as possible," it continued.

Greg Fuderer, an Army Corps spokesman, said part of the protocol was that, even after archeologists finished an analysis of the artifacts, the remains should remain available in the preparation of research documents and reports. However, the archeological firm has since determined there's a low probability it would need to physically inspect the burial features.

"The original estimate was that it would take until 2010 to complete all these requirements," Fuderer said.

Dorame and others were angered by that timeline.

"It's been a battle with these people for quite a few years now," said Anthony Morales, chief of the Gabrieleno-Tongva San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians.

Morales is one of several plaintiffs in a lawsuit challenging the environmental documents for Playa Vista's second phase, a mixed-use section called The Village. A state appeals

court halted work there because of a handful of disputed land-use issues, including archeological effects. (The riparian corridor was constructed as part of the first phase of homes and office buildings.)

"It's just pressure mounting on them finally," Morales said.

"We do believe that these remains have to be reburied in a dignified fashion," said Larry Myers, executive secretary of the Native American Heritage Commission. "Timely is one (issue), how you do it is one thing, where you do it is another thing.

"We tried to meet with Playa Vista and tried to meet with the Army Corps and said, 'Let's speed it up,'" Myers said. "We said, 'We can't let this go on.'"

Rosendahl, who visited the site Friday with Dorame, Grenda and Playa Vista officials, said he "was not going to rest until the human remains were put to rest."

The councilman has also challenged the original reburial time frame and said he was happy to learn a few days before the commission meeting last month that the remains would be reinterred this spring.

In addition, Playa Vista plans to memorialize the history of the Tongva people in an open space area at the foot of the bluffs, not far from the burial site.

Plans are in motion to build the so-called Discovery Center next to a flat plot eyed for a new elementary school. Playa Vista officials said the gathering place was conceptualized by the architectural firm led by Edwin Schlossberg, who is married to Caroline Kennedy.

They showed a rendering to Dorame late last week as he walked the roughly 2-acre dirt lot.

Afterward, he planned to see the storage space where the remains are housed. Dorame carried sage for a traditional cleansing ceremony he planned to perform before entering.

"I face death a lot because of the ancestors. It's always the same. It's an emotional situation," he said. "We're working diligently so we won't have to take people out of the ground."

kristin.agostoni@dailybreeze.com