



# Road Services digs into the past

*Cultural Resources Protection program saves time—and traces of our history*

Whenever a backhoe chomps into the ground somewhere in King County, there's a possibility it could unearth remnants of the past—perhaps a prehistoric stone pestle, a Native American basket-making tool, or the hearth of a 19th-century cabin.

Road Services project engineers want to know what history might be hidden at a road or bridge construction site before their heavy equipment goes to work. Discoveries made after work is underway could result in damaged artifacts or costly delays while authorities decide how—or whether—the project can proceed.

That's why the division created its award-winning Cultural Resources Protection Program. The division compiled a comprehensive database about known and suspected artifacts in King County, and uses it to investigate every project site as part of a thorough cultural resources protection process. Road Services employs an archaeologist—a rarity in county government—to manage the program.

## Data collection took five years

The division began putting its program in place seven years ago. Using a grant from the Federal Highways Administration, Road Services hired an archaeologist to create the cultural resources database—a process that took five years. The data was drawn from a range of sources, such as old land surveys

showing where cabins and roads were located in the 1800s, ethnographers' notes of interviews conducted with Native Americans in the first half of the 20th century, the Burke Museum's records of sites where citizens have found artifacts, and the state's registry of archaeological sites and historic buildings.

This unique compilation of data was overlaid on a GIS map. The resulting system allows a researcher to locate a site on the map and find all the data known about it, in one place.

When Road Services starts planning a construction project, staff archaeologist Tom Minichillo searches the database for information about the site's cultural history. Minichillo says the system is a huge time-saver. Without it he would have to travel to Olympia, the UW, and elsewhere to examine separate records.

If his data search suggests the site might contain artifacts, Minichillo conducts an archaeological survey—which usually means he or a contract archaeologist goes out there and digs. If artifacts are found, and further study determines that the site is culturally significant, the Road Services Division works with state, federal and tribal authorities to agree on a protection or mitigation plan long before construction begins.



Archaeologist Tom Minichillo, right, and surveyor Richard Clark talk about how an intersection roundabout would help prevent traffic increases on the county's historic Red Brick Road. They also discussed plans for an interpretive kiosk at a pull-out built from salvaged bricks.

Minichillo says Road Services managers have steadfastly supported this process, even though it can put a wrinkle into a construction project. "No one here is unhappy when you find things during planning," he said. "The bad thing is when you find something after you've given someone a contract and heavy equipment is on-site. This process is like an insurance policy."

Minichillo describes the division's Novelty Hill Road project as an example.

Early in the planning stage of this road-widening project, the division had three alternative road



Archaeology consultants do an archaeological survey for the Novelty Hill Road project.

alignments in mind. Minichillo identified seven places among them where an archaeological find looked probable. A field survey uncovered stone artifacts in one of those places. Information about the find was made public and included in the draft environmental impact statement for the project.

It turned out that after all environmental factors were considered, the site alternative that contains artifacts was chosen for the project. The road planners considered whether they could avoid the historic site, but found that was impossible because of engineering requirements and the locations of nearby homes.

As a result, Minichillo is now leading the development of a mitigation plan. Road Services will work with tribes and government authorities on a memorandum of understanding that describes what actions the division will take to mitigate impacts on the historic site as the division improves Novelty Hill Road.

Road Services isn't the only group that benefits from the Cultural Resources Protection Program. King County's Historic Preservation Program was a partner in developing the database and GIS system and relies on it, as do other county departments. The preservation office has assumed responsibility of keeping the database up-to-date, and recently won a federal grant to enhance the system by writing a description of the county's cultural resources and what can be predicted based on current knowledge.



King County Executive Ron Sims accepts a 2007 Achievement Award from the National Association of Counties for the Road Services Division's Cultural Resources Protection Program. The award was presented at NACo's Annual Conference in Richmond, Virginia, last July.

The program also was selected as "Best in Category" for the Arts and Historic Preservation category—one of only 14 such awards conferred nationwide.