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Archeological Site Protection in La Quinta, CA



A typical bedrock milling station slick and handstone found along the base of the mountains in La Quinta. Many of these are being preserved and incorporated as golf course landscape features. Photo by the author.

La Quinta, California, is a small community of 19,000 located approximately 30 miles southeast of Palm Springs, at the base of the Santa Rosa Mountains, in the Salton Basin of the Colorado Desert. The city was incorporated in 1982, but historic settlement began in the area over 100 years ago. Known for its golfing opportunities and as a hideaway for the stars, La Quinta is now approximately 32 square miles in size and is still growing.

Twenty-five years of archeological investigations have resulted in the discovery of over 200 prehistoric sites in the area spanning the last 3,000 years. The sites are significant to the local area and offer a clear picture of increasing interaction through time between prehistoric cultures of the Pacific Coast and Colorado River regions.

Since the city's incorporation, La Quinta has experienced continual urban development pressure as it has grown from a small village community to a progressive city. Numerous residential subdivisions have been reviewed, approved, and constructed in La Quinta, many of them on top of prehistoric residential areas. This continued development puts many of the archeological sites at risk.

To mitigate this risk of archeological site destruction, La Quinta has, over the past 10 years, developed an award-winning cultural resource management program. The program has elevated the level of legal compliance with state cultural resource laws and has become a model of local cultural resource stewardship. The success of the archeological resource management program in La Quinta directly relates to its passage of a historic preservation ordinance in 1992; this put the city on record as saying that the cultural heritage of the area is significant and worthy of proper consideration and protection efforts.* Because of this commitment, La Quinta was awarded a Certificate of Recognition for an Outstanding Local Cultural Resources Management Program by the Association of Environmental Professionals in 1996, and the President's Award by the California Preservation Foundation in 1998.

Although the city regards its cultural resources with a somewhat holistic approach, considering historic, archeological, and paleontological resources alike, there is special emphasis on archeological

sites. This emphasis is included as a primary component of the city's certification as a Certified Local Government (CLG), a national preservation program administered by the National Park Service and the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). Being a CLG entitles the city to benefit from special grant monies, technical advice, and the prestige associated with being certified.

The city's Historic Preservation Ordinance and Historic Preservation Commission are approved by the CLG Program, which means that the ordinance and the commission both meet federal and state standards for proper consideration and protection of cultural resources. The ordinance follows the California State model, and provides the tool for the city staff and Historic Preservation Commission to utilize in enforcing proper survey, recordation, and mitigation of the archeological resources in La Quinta. Prior to enactment of this ordinance, the city had to rely on implementation of the California Environmental Quality Act, Appendix K, as its only tool to require proper archeological investigations for private development projects. The ordinance provides the needed local legislation in support of the state law.

The ordinance requires that the city have a qualified Historic Preservation Commission composed of both professionals meeting the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and qualified lay members. As La Quinta is a relatively small city, it has at times been difficult to find professionally qualified candidates for the commission. An amendment to the ordinance allows for non-resident professionally qualified candidates to be appointed by the City Council to the commission. Lay-commissioners must be residents of La Quinta. With an active local historical society, there is never a shortage of lay-member candidates.

The next most important component of the archeological resource management program is the requirement that all archeological reports submitted to the city follow the Archeological Resource Management Report (ARMR) format as recommended by the California SHPO. This format ensures that there is a standard style of reporting that is detailed and comprehensive. The ARMR for-

mat provides for easier review of archeological reports by the city staff.

A Historic Context Statement has been researched and written by staff that covers an extensive period of time ranging from 10,000 years before present to 1950. This document identifies and describes thematic and chronological periods in the history of La Quinta. It also sets forth criteria for determining significance for the city's cultural resources from these periods. La Quinta's Context Statement is a little different from most other California cities in that there is an equal amount of attention paid to the prehistoric heritage as there is to the historic built environment. The document is intended to be updated and expanded periodically as more pieces of the city's archeological puzzle are fitted together.

New to the city's cultural resource management program is the Cultural Resources Element that is being prepared for the city's General Plan. A General Plan is required by state law for every city in California to identify its goals, policies, and objectives for both development and open space preservation. The Cultural Resources Element will guide the city in planning and considering its cultural resources for the future. This particular element is not required by state law, thus its inclusion will provide yet another local preservation tool.

Throughout the development of La Quinta's cultural resource management program, it has been necessary to educate city staff and decision-makers on its implementation. The first task was educating staff, which includes planners and engineering department personnel. Cultural resources are one of the environmental issues on the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Initial Study Checklist that must be addressed as to presence, significance, project impacts, and reasonable mitigation measures. Since the planners prepare these Initial Studies, they were the first target group for educating. In 1992, the planners did not know that they should require that archeological reports make significance determinations or to look for opportunities to redesign projects to preserve archeological sites located within a project boundary. The intent of CEQA was not being met. The planners were informed about CEQA and laws pertaining to archeological resources and were briefed about the standard professional archeological practices. This educational process was accomplished through casual discussions, formal presentations at workshops, and information memos and materials.

Staff of the engineering departments, who typically were not involved with archeological sites until the project implementation/permit issuance phase, are now brought in at the design review phase. Similar educational efforts and tools have been used for this group. Field engineering inspectors were

briefed on the nature of archeological sites and artifacts, archeological laws, pot hunting, and the responsibilities and methods of project archeologists. The field staff have become the "eyes and ears" for the city in the field, interfacing with project archeologists.

Making archeological resource management palatable to city administrators and decision makers required more subtle and persuasive efforts accentuating the "carrot" of the various benefits of proper management by the city, rather than the "stick" of legal liability and compliance. Informal discussions and detailed staff reports have provided much of the education for this group. The "carrot" aspects that the staff has focused on have included pride in community prehistory and history, historic tourism, and the importance of scientific investigation of the city's archeological resources.

The implementation of the city's archeological resource management efforts has included networking with archeologists, historians, and paleontologists in both academia and the professional contract worlds. Networking has promoted effective working relationships, and reinforces the city's concern for its resources. One of the results of networking has been an improvement in the quality of archeological reports submitted to the city. There is a strong focus on research and interpretation in archeological resource investigation.

Close communication with the California SHPO and the local archeological information center is an important means of implementing the city's program. La Quinta communicates frequently with these agencies on a variety of topics ranging from organizing a training workshop to getting advice on technical issues and legal interpretations. Other agencies that are regularly contacted include the local and state archeological organizations, the local Native American tribal councils, and the various local conservancy groups. Communication is vital to effective implementation of a successful archeological resource management program.

The various components of La Quinta's archeological resource management program require continual monitoring to ensure proper implementation. As with any program, there are successes and setbacks. La Quinta has had repeated successes in implementing its program which has made the city a leader in local archeological resource management.

Note

* *La Quinta Historic Preservation Ordinance, Title 7, "Historic Preservation," La Quinta Municipal Code, 1992.*

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