

## **Group seeks permission to excavate for fossils near Vero Beach Municipal Airport**

### **Vero Beach will vote Tuesday to decide whether Old Vero Ice Age Sites Committee will get temporary use of the land for exploration**

By Janet Begley

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VERO BEACH — City officials Tuesday could give permission to a group seeking to excavate for fossils in an area near the municipal airport.

Under the city's historic preservation ordinance, the Old Vero Ice Age Sites Committee must get the OK from any landholders including the city, Indian River County, Indian River Farms Water Control District, the Florida East Coast Railroad and the Federal Aviation Administration before any excavation can begin, Planning and Development Director Tim McGarry said.

The property is between Aviation Boulevard and U.S. 1, and includes a 300-foot right of way along the main canal.

"The first step is to designate the historic area of interest," said McGarry. "Although some of the land belongs to the airport and the county, we are the permitting arm because it's in our district."

The City Council on Tuesday will vote on a memorandum of understanding between the city and the Old Vero Ice Age Sites Committee that will be the framework for guiding the joint effort between the city and the committee for the preservation and excavation of the site. If approved, City Manager Jim O'Connor would then sign a separate license agreement for temporary use of the land at the airport for the exploration.

The Federal Aviation Administration also would have to agree to the use of the land.

Around 1915, dredging at this site unearthed human remains possibly 13,000 years old, along with the remains of now extinct animals including mammoth, mastodon, saber-tooth cat and ancient species of tapir, horse and sloth. It is only one of two sites in North America where Ice Age human skeletons and animal bones have been found in the same place, making the find significant.

Barbara Purdy, a retired anthropology professor from the University of Florida, said Florida State geologist Elias Sellards dated the bones, which became known as the Vero Man, at more than 10,000 years old. In 2005, Purdy and archaeological researcher Thomas Stafford did a preliminary dig at the site, which is near the county administration building on 27th Street.

Susan Grandpierre from the Old Vero Ice Age Sites Committee presented information about the proposed dig at the Dec. 13 County Commission meeting at the request of Commissioner member Bob Solari.

"The Old Vero Man site has already been evaluated and selected by Thomas Stafford, Barbara Purdy and other scientists as having a high probability of containing significant fossils and artifacts," said Grandpierre. "We plan to work with experts, scientists, universities and the city of Vero Beach and the County Commission to develop and excavate the site."

Solari said he is in favor of the project as long as it does not disrupt vital county services.

"This is something that is good for the community," Solari said at the meeting. "I'm glad the private sector is doing this and I hope the private sector continues to do this."

Funding for excavation could be expensive, Grandpierre said, with at least \$150,000 needed before any digging could begin. If money is raised, the dig could start as early as October.

"Overall, we really don't know how much we're going to need," said Grandpierre. "The project could likely extend over two to three years and then we could be talking more than \$1 million."

Money for any type of excavation is unlikely from the city, McGarry said.

"The city does not have the money to do this," said McGarry. "We would be willing to spend some in-kind funds like staff time but we are expecting the committee to take the lead."

Grandpierre said the committee has received its designation as a nonprofit organization and is pursuing grants to pay for the project. They are also seeking private donations from the community.

"We want this to be a community adventure," said Grandpierre. "Whether people donate \$10 or \$10,000 we want everyone to know they can participate in this exciting project."

#### THE COMMITTEE

The Old Vero Sites Ice Age Committee is dedicated to the preservation and further excavation of the Vero Man site in Vero Beach Florida and other significant archaeological/paleontological sites in Indian River County.

For more information or to join the committee, visit [www.oviasc.org](http://www.oviasc.org).



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