



Historic landmark vs. the EPA

By Knute Berger

August 06, 2009

Government projects are supposed to follow the rules when it comes to analyzing the impact, and mitigating potential damage, to historic sites. But often government is the problem.

Down to Earth is an environmental blog that covers the Inland Northwest. Their blog has been covering a controversial Environmental Protection agency clean-up project in Idaho's Silver Valley that poses a potential hazard to Cataldo Mission, the oldest standing building in the state and a remarkable structure. Dating from the 1840s, the Jesuit mission's Greek Revival style and wattle-and-daub construction without nails is remarkable. It's also the oldest surviving mission in the Pacific Northwest and on the National Register of Historic Places.

At issue is the proposed toxic waste storage site that is an attempt to deal with mining waste called the Eastern Mission Flats repository. A good idea to clean up this mining region, but greens and preservationists are concerned that the EPA has not fully studied potential impacts (floods, ground-water contamination) that could result, and they argue that the project, already under way, will damage "historic view sheds" and poses a threat to significant archaeological sites connected to the old mission. They worry that the state and feds have neglected to follow the rules for studying alternative sites and impacts. The EPA's own Inspector General has also found the EPA's process has been flawed.

In Washington, another battle over a messed-up process has erupted over the Port of Everett's decision to destroy the historic Collins Building (see Peter Jackson's excellent overview of Everett's historic waterfront issues here). Not only are activists furious with the Port for the decision, but the state's Historic Preservation Officer, Allyson Brooks, has weighed in with a blistering July 29 letter to the Army Corps of Engineers saying the Corps "failed to perform its due diligence" as the lead federal agency in overseeing the proposed Port plans, and that they "abrogated their responsibility" in not requiring fuller consideration of alternatives to demolition of the building. They also failed, according to Brooks, to sufficiently solicit public comment

during the process.

Few people like state, federal, or for that matter private sector, bureaucracy. But the rules and process for consideration of heritage and cultural issues are well known. Yet in the realm of preservation, public agencies often steamroller history as a mere inconvenience. The public sector is supposed to be, by law, a paragon of heritage sensitivity, but, for many regulators apparently, only when it suits.

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Printed on December 14, 2009