

Vancouver Courier

published on 09/08/2006

New aquarium plan expands expansion

By Sandra Thomas-Staff writer

A COPE parks commissioner is "astounded" the Vancouver Aquarium wants even more land for its proposed expansion than it requested earlier this year.

Commissioner Loretta Woodcock noted that at a July meeting, the parks board deferred a vote on the expansion of the Vancouver Aquarium- Marine Science Centre because there were concerns regarding the public consultation.

"But now we have a technical report that shows no changes to the public consultation plan, but instead they want to expand their footprint by 50 per cent," said Woodcock. "I can't believe they did that."

Earlier this year the aquarium asked the board for permission to expand by one acre, or 27 per cent. The proposed \$80 million expansion includes new larger pools for belugas, dolphins, sea otters and sea lions, and new public washrooms, two galleries, an animal care facility and a restaurant. The revised technical plan shows the aquarium now wants to expand by 1.5 acres, or 50 per cent.

That expansion would mean a loss of 32 trees, and 1.34 acres of greenspace, most of it on the former site of the city's defunct zoo to the south of the aquarium's main entrance. The proposal returns to the board for approval Sept. 11.

Woodcock's surprised the board's NPA commissioners support a public consultation paid for by the aquarium. The aquarium hired communications consultants Kirk & Co. at a reported \$300,000 to hold public consultations, which will include notification letters, emails, newspaper ads, information signs, notices at all parks board facilities, open-house events and a survey that will go to aquarium members across B.C.

Woodcock wants a referendum on the expansion. But in May the majority NPA commissioners overturned a 1995 motion that expansion of the aquarium would need approval through public referenda.

Commissioner Allan De Genova, who in May was suspended from the NPA for six months, agrees with criticism of the consultation. De Genova holds the swing vote on the board. If he sides with COPE against the proposal, the expansion project would be voted down.

"I'm just not comfortable with the way the consultation is going down," said De Genova, who historically supports the aquarium. "But I've met with staff and I'm meeting with [aquarium president] John Nightingale Friday. I'll make my decision after that."

Like Woodcock, De Genova is uncomfortable with the idea aquarium members across B.C. have a large say in an issue that affects Vancouver.

"My biggest concern with the consultation process is the minimum community involvement. I want to see a true consultation, not some glossy brochure," said De Genova, a realtor. "It's like they're doing a pre-sale the same way I do when I'm selling a condo, and I can tell you, you can't sell to a salesman."

De Genova said he would be comfortable putting the decision off until next spring if necessary. "I just don't want to respond with some knee-jerk reaction," he said.

NPA commissioner Ian Robertson said he's "disappointed" Woodcock feels the public consultation is influenced by the fact the aquarium is footing the bill. Robertson is the board's spokesperson on the aquarium because board chair Heather Holden is an aquarium employee.

"This is a staff-driven consultation," he said. "Frankly I don't think the consultation would be accepted if it wasn't done in a transparent manner. What validity would it have if the aquarium were controlling it? That's illogical."

Robertson said a referendum is not needed.

"The citizens of Vancouver elected us to make these decisions," he said. "And that responsibility lies with the parks board."

Denis Howarth, a former lawyer acting on behalf of the Coalition for No Whales in Captivity, said by supporting an aquarium-driven public consultation the parks board is committing "political suicide."

"It's like city councillors saying they can't be bothered holding a public consultation on a development so they let the developer host open houses and then provide all of the input," said Howarth.

Nightingale was away until today and unavailable for comment before the Courier's press deadline. Monday's meeting is at VanDusen Botanical Garden, 5251 Oak St., at 7 p.m. (See related story next page.)

published on 09/08/2006