

Your Vancouver Sun

Aquarium expansion in limbo after vote

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Published: Tuesday, September 12, 2006

VANCOUVER - A proposed plan to increase the size of the Vancouver Aquarium by 50 per cent is in limbo after the Vancouver park board decided Monday night to sever itself from a controversial public consultation process.

In a 5-1 vote, the board agreed to an eleventh-hour motion put forward by Commissioner Allan De Genova to allow the aquarium to seek public support for the proposal to expand the facility further into Stanley Park.

But the board also decided the process must go forward without the board's full co-sponsorship.

De Genova said public consultation taken to date by the aquarium -- led by a public relations firm -- is "way too slick for me. It needs to be more transparent."

The board's decision left Vancouver Aquarium president John Nightingale bewildered.

"I don't understand what they want," he said. "I understand in words what they said, but I don't understand what they are driving at."

Nightingale said the aquarium board will take the next few days to determine what it will do next. The aquarium said it was willing to invest \$300,000 in a public consultation process that Nightingale believed would produce the most valid barometer of public opinion.

Park commissioner Loretta Woodcock, however, said the process put forward by the aquarium was asking the public to support the proposal first, then ask questions later.

She said under the motion approved Monday, the aquarium would be treated like any other tenant in the park -- it will need to put forward a credible case for its expansion.

The board will then vote.

Of Monday's motion, Woodcock said "this is not anti-aquarium. It is anti-process."

About 100 people attended Monday's park board meeting held at VanDusen Botanical Gardens.

The \$70-million expansion, which was introduced to the board in May, would include building larger habitats for the aquarium's marine life, new underwater viewing areas, new facilities for animal care, two new indoor galleries, plus expanded food services and gift shop.

The project would destroy 0.6 hectares of Stanley Park green space and require cutting down 32 trees, according to a technical report on the project prepared by the Vancouver park board.

It is stirring up concern among some park board commissioners, who fear the project is chipping away at valuable land. Some of the trees that are slated to be chopped are more than 30 centimetres in diameter, including a Western red cedar that is more than 200 years old.

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