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Aquarium consultation a PR job

by Allen Garr

A tourist in our town faced with the staff reports and recent events at the Vancouver parks board could only assume the board was intent in allowing the Vancouver Aquarium to expand its facilities by another 50 per cent. There's lots of upside and not much downside: just a couple dozen trees coming out that wouldn't be worth a sawmill's time to slice into lumber.

From a tally of the 16 speakers at Monday night's parks board meeting, you would conclude there's massive support for the \$80-million project. Eleven of the 16 were in favour. Most, however, were aquarium employees, board members or volunteers.

And when you look at the material presented to the board, including an outline of the proposal to gather opinions from the general public, you may agree with parks commissioner Allan De Genova who said, "This is way too slick for me."

Since it opened in Stanley Park in 1956, the aquarium has received board permission to expand eight times. This expansion is by far the biggest and will gobble up another 1.5 acres of what is now public space.

In 1995, following a controversial increase in the size of the pools for beluga whales, the NPA-dominated board said a referendum would be necessary before the aquarium could expand again. The recent COPE-dominated board promised a plebiscite in 2008 on the future containment of whales and dolphins at the aquarium.

On May 16, the aquarium told the board's planning committee of its latest plan for expansion and revitalization. Among other things, the board was told, none of this would increase public attendance figures.

Two weeks later, the NPA-dominated board passed a motion to reverse the 11-year-old policy requiring a referendum in advance of any new expansion. It also removed the commitment to hold a plebiscite on whales in captivity.

The board told the aquarium it would participate as a partner in the public consultation. And the aquarium agreed to cover the \$300,000 cost.

But the board first wanted to look at a technical report on the impact of the expansion and board staff was directed to work with the aquarium to fine-tune the proposal.

The table was set for the expansion to go ahead as quickly as possible. As we were told by aquarium president John Nightingale Monday night, "We want Vancouver to look its best by February 2010." Who knew the aquarium was an Olympic facility?

Monday night board members reviewed the technical report. It listed many benefits including a new food facility, public toilets, better organized public space and free

viewing facilities. There would be more and larger pools for the whales, dolphins and other sea mammals.

Board members also considered the public consultation; they received the latest draft two days before. And then the worm turned.

De Genova compared it to a real-estate hustle, and he's seen more than a few of those in his many years in the real estate business. "It sort of tells you how great it is and don't you think so, too."

He doesn't believe the attendance at the aquarium won't increase and put more pressure on park infrastructure. He also doesn't believe the number of whales and dolphins in captivity won't increase.

For those reasons, he moved a motion to remove the parks board logo from the documents the aquarium was distributing and sever the partnership with the aquarium on the public consultation. The motion passed, which caught the aquarium by surprise. Nightingale told one reporter: "I don't understand what they want."

This is not to say the expansion will not go ahead. But it does at least allow the board to appear a bit more concerned about Stanley Park and the public interest and less of a cheerleader for the aquarium.

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