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Vancouver Aquarium shouldn't expand before referendum: group

VANCOUVER (CP) - A move by Canada's largest aquarium to expand its facility is stirring up controversy among animal-rights groups and those who don't want any land at world-renowned Stanley Park to be involved.

John Nightingale, executive director of the Vancouver Aquarium, said Thursday a public consultation will be held between Sept. 25 and Oct. 30 to seek community input on the \$80-million proposal.

"We know we hear from an activist and a negative side frequently," Nightingale said as two dolphins swam in a nearby pool.

"What we want to know is what about the people in the middle, what do they think?"

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The aquarium, nestled in the picturesque park, has been fundraising but much of the money for the project will likely come from federal, provincial and municipal governments.

Completion of the facility would be slated for fall 2009 before tourists from around the world visit Vancouver for the 2010 Olympic Games.

Along with larger pools that could accommodate up to eight whales and eight dolphins, the plan includes medical and maternity facilities for the animals.

The consultation process will include public open houses, an on-line feedback form, newspaper ads, a survey and focus groups throughout Vancouver.

But Annelise Sorg, spokeswoman for the group No Whales in Captivity, said most people wouldn't support the expansion plans at the cost of millions of taxpayer dollars.

"The biggest concern here for us is that the public is really not being consulted as they should be," Sorg said, adding a referendum would be the best way to gauge public opinion.

"This should be done by the government and the aquarium should really back off from this farce that is their public relations campaign and allow for a public referendum to be conducted city-wide where everybody has a chance to vote on the issue."

A 1993 referendum on the zoo in Stanley Park closed the facility, Sorg noted, adding that's what's needed now for the aquarium.

She said bigger pools at the 50-year-old facility would just mean more dolphins and whales in captivity, something that most people wouldn't go for.

But Nightingale said community polling has shown that 70 to 80 per cent of people support the aquarium's plans to expand and revitalize the facility that draws 900,000 visitors every year.

Clint Wright, vice-president of operations at the aquarium, said the expanded pools would accommodate eight beluga whales and eight white-sided dolphins.

The Vancouver Aquarium was also home to orcas, but after the male died, the aquarium shipped the remaining female off to Seaworld in San Diego in 2001 because she was lonely.

The aquarium said at the time it would focus on belugas and white-sided dolphins and would no longer house killer whales.

Currently, the aquarium has four dolphins and four beluga whales. Two other belugas are on loan to other facilities.

The aquarium also houses 70,000 other creatures, including fish, invertebrates, mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians.

If the expansion goes ahead, beavers and sea birds, along with more species of fish, would be brought in.

David Gates, who was visiting the aquarium with his 2 1/2-year-old son Johnnie on Thursday, said he doesn't like the idea of the aquarium expanding into Stanley Park.

"I really value the aquarium but at the same time you wonder isn't there any areas where we could do further development of an aquarium facility?" Gates said. "Why do

we have to eat into green space?"

The ultimate decision on whether the aquarium will be allowed to expand rests with Vancouver's park board, which will make its decision at the end of November.

Unlike other cities in Canada, Vancouver's park board is elected during civic elections every three years.

Ian Robertson, one of seven park commissioners, said the board voted 5-1 earlier this month to allow the aquarium to conduct the public consultation without input from the board.

Robertson was the lone dissenter and said that as an elected official, he felt the board should represent citizens in the process.

"It's an emotional issue," he said of the many e-mails he gets from both supporters and critics of the aquarium's proposal.

"I have every confidence that (the aquarium) will conduct an objective process and we'll see what those results are.

"However, without the park board being involved, it throws into question the credibility of the information that comes back."

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