

COPE urges referendum regarding aquarium expansion

John Bermingham, The Province

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Plans to expand the Vancouver Aquarium in Stanley Park are making waves.

It's expected to be a whale of a meeting at the Vancouver parks board tomorrow night, as the board decides how to consult the public on the issue.

The aquarium wants to take over 0.6 hectares of Stanley Park to expand by 50 per cent. The targeted area, which includes the old zoo site, is large enough to allow for green space around the aquarium.

The opposition COPE said a citywide referendum should be held regarding the project.

"The residents and the taxpayers of Vancouver are the ones most directly impacted by what takes place in Stanley Park," said COPE commissioner Loretta Woodcock on Friday.

The NPA-dominated board --slated to vote in November on whether to approve the project -- is against holding a referendum.

Aquarium executive director John Nightingale doesn't want a referendum either.

"Plebiscites only allow you to make a yes or no decision," said Nightingale. "It tends to create winners and losers, dividing the community into two camps."

Nightingale said the public will be asked to comment on the proposed expansion -- estimated at \$80 million. The new design includes larger pools for dolphins, beluga whales, sea lions and otters.

Anti-captivity activist Annelise Sorg fears the expansion will result in more wild animals making their way into the aquarium.

"Bigger whale pools mean more whales," said Sorg. "An expansion, of course, means more whales in captivity."

Nightingale responded, "The new pools will not cause an increase in animals. It will provide the animals who are here with a much better home."

With a project completion deadline of fall 2009, Nightingale added, it's vital a decision on the aquarium plans is made quickly.

Tomorrow night's board meeting is at Van Dusen Botanical Garden, 5251 Oak Street, at 7 p.m.

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