

Aquarium's plans to expand are awash in park board bafflegab

Vancouver Sun

Published: Wednesday, September 13, 2006

The Vancouver Aquarium is anxious to get public input regarding an expansion plan that promises to make it a better venue for visitors, employees and the 70,000 creatures that reside there. But getting the politicians onside is like herding fish.

Park board commissioners voted Monday to disassociate themselves from a Public consultation process that they themselves had initiated with the explanation that it was "too slick." Coalition of Progressive Electors Commissioner Loretta Woodcock explained that their decision to put the proposal in limbo and thereby jeopardize the entire project was not anti-aquarium: "It's anti-process."

What a load of poppycock. The consultation was slick all right. The Vancouver Aquarium was putting up \$300,000 to hire professional communicators to make sure that every detail of the proposal was available to anyone who wanted to know about it through discussion guides, newspaper inserts, websites, power point presentations, e-mails, interviews, focus groups, stakeholder meetings, a public attitude survey and open houses where scale models would be on display. There would be work with teachers and input from academics and other technical experts. The process would provide multiple avenues for feedback.

Non-Partisan Association Commissioner Allan De Genova's incomprehensible criticism: "It needs to be more transparent."

COPE wants a referendum on the expansion, but mob rule is not the way to conduct a productive discussion on the proposal.

Vancouver Aquarium president John Nightingale says he's bewildered by the board's action -- or inaction. "I don't understand what they want," he said.

Nor do we. But we know what we want -- a bigger, refurbished aquarium that will offer even more enjoyment and education than the current facility can offer. The proposal, estimated to cost \$70 million to \$80 million, calls for larger pools for dolphins, belugas, otters and sea lions, new underwater viewing, two new galleries, new animal care facilities, a new main entrance, new meeting rooms and a larger gift shop and expanded food services. The free public viewing area will be replaced by three viewing areas with a combined length greater than the existing one; two of those will allow underwater viewing.

There has been something of a hue and cry about encroachment on green space in Stanley Park. But the sacrifice of some grass and trees must be kept in perspective. Of Stanley Park's 404 hectares, the existing aquarium occupies 1.2 hectares, or less than 0.3 per cent of the total area. The proposed expansion would add 0.54 hectares -- about 1.34 acres for those who haven't yet made the transition to metric. A good swath of the land to be redeveloped is the abandoned zoo site.

The so-called "footprint" of the aquarium on Stanley Park is the track of a squirrel rather than of a sasquatch. Think of the relationship of the aquarium to Stanley Park as a 38-square-centimetre canvas bag base on the typical 0.8 hectare baseball diamond.

Opposition to the expansion seems focused on trees that will be lost to Accommodate it. But the controversy is based on a false reading of the proposal. It calls for retention -- not removal -- of 52 of 84 trees affected by the expansion. No conifers with tree diameters greater than 60 centimeters will be cut down and only two deciduous trees of that size will be lost. Most of the trees to be cleared have diameters under 30 centimetres. The proposal calls for replanting to replace some of those trees.

If not for political dithering, the consultation process would be well under way by now and there'd be an outside chance of meeting a projected completion date in the fall of 2009. As it stands, the Vancouver Aquarium doesn't know if the park board wants it to proceed or not. The board seemed to give it a green light, saying that the public consultation process must move forward. But then it put up a stop sign by withdrawing its sponsorship of the process. The Vancouver Aquarium is at the mercy of the park board. It needs clear direction from the commissioners. It's time for them to drop their drivel and deliver it.

© The Vancouver Sun 2006