

Your Province

Aquarium gets facelift Plan outrages environmentalists

Andy Ivens, The Province
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The Vancouver Aquarium launched its battle for the hearts and minds of citizens yesterday on the issue of expansion.

The expansion -- a 50-per-cent increase in its footprint -- would make life better for its marine mammals but green space would be sacrificed, mostly around the former zoo exhibits.

The concentrated effort to get public input kicks off Monday.

There will be open houses and people will be encouraged to fill out a questionnaire, e-mail their opinions, attend stakeholder meetings or attend one-on-one interviews.

An independent market-research firm will conduct a public survey and hear from five randomly selected focus groups.

Vancouver's parks board will vote on the \$80-million proposal in mid-November.

If it gets the green light, the completion date will be the fall of 2009.

"A big chunk of the money is going to have to come from governments, but we also are great at raising money in the community," said aquarium president John Nightingale.

"The aquarium is the only large, cultural non-profit [organization] in Canada that operates without annual government subsidy. There's not another art gallery, museum, zoo, symphony in Canada that operates without an annual government subsidy."

The 40-year-old concrete structures of the outdoor pools are crumbling, said Nightingale.

"In five to seven years, these columns won't be safe," he said, standing in the underwater viewing area of the beluga whale pool.

Opponents of the aquarium expansion, such as Annelise Sorg, the founder and director of the Coalition for No Whales in Captivity, want a referendum.

She called the appeal for public input a public-relations farce.

"Why not have a referendum? Why is the aquarium so afraid of referendums?" asked

Sorg.

"We know they don't have that support. Everybody knows they are making bigger whale pools to bring in more whales."

Sorg disputed Nightingale's claim that the aquarium will not acquire more wild whales or dolphins.

"In October of 2005, they just bought two wild dolphins from Japan," she said.

"They say they rescued the dolphins -- do you think they rescue dolphins in Japan?" she scoffed. "In Japan, it's illegal to let dolphins go."

The aquarium opened in 1956 and has undergone eight expansions, from 0.13 hectares to the current 1.2 hectares. The proposal would see that area grow to 1.8 hectares.

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WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Tell us by e-mail at provletters@png.canwest.com, or by fax at 604-605-2223. Please include your name and address.

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