

Straight Talk

Straight Talk Archives

Did aquarium boss break rule dealing with partisan politics?

By *charlie smith*

Publish Date: 24-Nov-2005

Prior to the civic election, Vancouver Aquarium Marine Science Centre president and CEO **John Nightingale** sent an e-mail to the charity's members highlighting various Vancouver-park-board candidates' statements. In the November 8 e-mail, Nightingale wrote that the aquarium couldn't tell its members which candidates to support. He noted that the park board narrowly approved a motion on October 31 calling for a plebiscite in 2008 on "phasing out the containment of whales and dolphins in Stanley Park".

"Our long term goal, which we announced publicly last month, is to complete much-needed but costly renovations to the Wild Coast and Arctic Canada exhibits over the next four years, working in consultation with the Park Board," Nightingale wrote.

He claimed that the decision to hold a plebiscite in 2008 was not only "an attack on your Aquarium" but also "a waste of taxpayers' money", because the organization has a valid lease until 2015.

The Vancouver Aquarium Marine Science Centre is a registered charity that generated \$24 million in revenue in 2004. According to the Canada Revenue Agency Web site (www.cra-arc.gc.ca/), a registered charity is prohibited from supporting an election candidate in one of its newsletters. Canada Revenue Agency officials did not respond by deadline to the *Straight's* inquiry about whether or not Nightingale's e-mail could be construed as a partisan political message.

In the e-mail, Nightingale quoted several park-board candidates, including two opponents of keeping cetaceans in captivity: the Green party's **Stuart Mackinnon** and COPE's **Mel Lehan**. Nightingale also quoted three supporters of the aquarium: independent candidate **Bill Grant**, NPA candidate **Ian Robertson** (who was elected), and NPA candidate **Sheryl Williamson-Harms**.

"If you care about your Aquarium, and the animals that live there, don't let a small group of activists decide our future," Nightingale wrote. "Vote wisely on November 19 and ask your friends and family to do the same."

Nightingale also highlighted comments by NPA candidate **Heather Holden**, who was elected to the park board with the second-highest number of votes. Holden, the aquarium's marine-science-programs administrator, was quoted speaking about the importance of the park board respecting park tenants' leases.