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Aquarium Expansion Moves Forward With Modifications

California Coastal Commission Requires \$50 Million Project Keep Open Space



The Aquarium at left and center, and Shoreline Park at right. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

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The Aquarium of the Pacific is allowed to expand facilities by 23,330 square feet into the adjacent Shoreline Park, just as long as almost the same amount of space remains public access, according to modifications approved by the California Coastal Commission at its April 14 meeting.

The non-profit Aquarium is in the beginning stages of a \$50 million expansion project that includes building a two-story, 56-foot-high addition called "Pacific Visions," a 350-seat theater, and extension of the gift shop and entrance lobby with the existing ticket booth to be demolished and replaced. The proposed addition also includes new public restrooms and an 11,520-square-foot digital display sign on the exterior façade. The Long Beach City Council already approved zoning changes and plans for the project last year.

In a final approval by the coastal commission during a meeting in Santa Barbara, commission staff outlined new modifications to the project in keeping with land use restrictions in accordance with the state's Coastal Act and amendments to the Downtown Shoreline Planned Development District.

These modifications include requiring the Aquarium to maintain a 24,000-square-foot unenclosed open space area for free public recreation on the northern portion of the Aquarium lease land, between the building and Aquarium Way. In addition, the open space must be improved with picnic tables, benches and non-invasive landscaping.

Subsequently, the new modifications override a previous plan to attain the required open space by displacing the nearby recreational vehicle (RV) park and constructing a new vehicle park, proposed with 70 spaces for RVs with associated office, convenience

services and retail facilities for park users. Commission staff said the recommendation didn't conform to certain coastal restrictions.

The Aquarium was built and completed in 1998 with restrictions that the adjacent Shoreline Park would remain 23 acres in size to provide the public with water-oriented recreational and education activities. Although the coastal commission has since approved various projects and expansions, the latest request requires the commission to lift restrictions limiting the Aquarium's size of 150,000 square feet and subsequently shrinking park space.

Barbara Long, the Aquarium's vice president of strategic planning and special projects, said during the meeting that the Aquarium plans to use the new addition for live animal exhibits as well as media-based exhibits, which hadn't previously been brought up by Aquarium staff. "While we will have a large media based chamber, and that is the feature of our expansion, we will definitely be enlarging our current changing gallery because it is the live animals that provide the cornerstone of the aquarium experience," she said.

Meanwhile, a new exhibit titled "Arctic & Antarctic: Our Polar Regions In Peril," along with the Aquarium's new Ocean Science Center gallery, including a technology-based exhibit called, "Science On a Sphere," is expected to officially open to the public on May 28. The new live animal exhibits are expected to feature an Arctic fox, Alaskan king crabs, feather stars, northern anchovies, lion's mane jellies, Arctic char, pteropods and krill, along with an interactive touch tank of moon jellies.

As part of the expansion, the Aquarium is also switching to a new salt-water intake system, filtering water directly from the ocean instead of hauling in water by truck. The switch to the new system should take roughly two years. ■