

Museum panel will reconsider site choices

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SANTA CRUZ — Task force members charged with recommending a new site for a natural-history museum agreed Wednesday they needed more time to mull an increasingly more complex decision.

So don't expect to hear from them again until late summer or early fall.

"It just seems like we need a little settling down time," said Jean Gervais, president of the Santa Cruz Museum Association and a member of the task force.

No date was set for the next meeting.

Scores of people packed the cramped natural-history museum on East Cliff Drive Wednesday night in hopes of hearing a recommendation. Clearly, most of them preferred a site other than the highly ranked Lighthouse Field.

But fresh information about both the old rail depot site on Washington Street and the Third Street site on the Seaside Co.'s river-side parking lot prompted Gervais to ask the task force to delay making a recom-

mendation.

There's even a chance that UC Santa Cruz might have a proposal for a piece of land between the arboretum and the farm and garden in the next few months that might entice the task force to take a fresh look at that site.

So it was a mixed decision for the crowd, which for the second meeting showed up en masse to make it clear that trying to build a museum at Lighthouse Field would meet stiff resistance.

It's clear the task force is grappling with the dichotomy of the Lighthouse Field site. On the one hand, it tops the list for most of the criteria outlined for a successful museum by the association. But it also appears to fail in one key category: Enjoying enough public support to overcome any negative reaction from neighbors or other concerned citizens.

The old depot site has sparked some interest among the anti-Lighthouse-Field crowd.

But Barry Swenson's company still is in escrow in the purchase of the site, and the plan for the city to buy it from Swenson can't happen until escrow closes

and grant money becomes available.

Even then, said council members on the task force, it's not clear whether there's enough land to support the already planned parking lot/city park plus a museum.

Councilman Michael Hernandez through another monkey wrench into the works by announcing that he had recently learned the site was one of the top choices of the Santa Cruz City Schools District for a new school.

If that pans out, the district would have the power to take the land out from under the city, said Hernandez.

The Third Street site hadn't been a popular one with the task force, but Hernandez said he had learned a committee looking into economic development tie-ins with the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary was interested in joining forces with the museum.

The committee, said Hernandez, is looking into the feasibility of building a 21st-century style center highlighting the Santa Cruz side of the bay that might be a

good partner for the museum.

County Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt cautioned that the concept of the center approaches a "virtual-reality" experience that might not be a good mix with a natural-history museum.

Tying the evening together was Robert Stephens, former president of the Museum Association, who noted the museum has been trying to expand for 22 years.

He pleaded with politicians to have some "vision," and asked citizens to work toward a site rather than simply denigrating unacceptable ones.

Stephens quieted the crowd as he choked back tears while telling a story about watching a group of students from Beach Flats at the museum who had never seen a banana slug despite living in an area rich in them.

"That's criminal," said Stevens, emphasizing that children of all cultures deserve access to the natural history around them.

If you want to be notified of the next task force meeting, call the museum at 429-3165.