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Journalist	Mel Fairhurst

Site visit to consider two Ness plans

Councillors want to see rival projects for multimillion-pound visitor centres

A special meeting may be held to determine whether two rival multimillion-pound visitor-centre developments are given the go-ahead on neighbouring sites on the banks of Loch Ness.

Plans for a £2.8million Jacobite Discovery Project – submitted by Loch Ness cruise operators Jacobite Cruises – were put before a Highland Council planning committee yesterday.

The plans were recommended for approval, but Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey planning application committee deferred a decision for a site visit to take place.

It is now envisaged members will also look at a neighbouring site at the same time because Loch Ness Centre and Exhibition at Drumnadrochit has applied for a £2million expansion of its site.

Highland Council planners hope to get councillors on to the site and for a decision to be made at a special meeting before members next meet on March 1.

Highland Council area planning manager David Polson said after the meeting: “If members are going to visit one site, it would be foolish not to look at the other one. If possible, we will conduct a site visit before the meeting in March, but it will take a little bit of organising.

“I have always expressed a preference that the two applications should be looked at side by side but, if an application is ready, we are expected to decide it.

“The two were out of kilter where extra information was required with one. Members don’t want to rush their decision and it is understandable they wanted to look at the site.”

Rod Michie, director for Jacobite Cruises, said after the meeting: “We are extremely disappointed because this will set us back at least another six months. We are a seasonable tourism business and, if this takes 18 months to construct, it probably means the facility won’t be available for the 2012 tourism season.

“We have heard today that each application should be made on its own merit. At no time have we made any objection to the other proposal. We have been around for 37 years and this is probably the most major step the company has made, and this planning application has been on the go for eight months now. We will battle on.”

Loch Ness Centre and Exhibition managing director Robert Bremner said: “I think it is fair and that a site visit is the sensible thing to do. The deferral means that not only will both applications be seen at the same committee meeting, but councillors will have the opportunity to visit both project sites and get a visual understanding of how the developments could look.”

The Jacobite Cruises development would span 4.4 acres and incorporate 81 car parking spaces on land each side of the loch-side A82 Inverness-Fort William road at Brackla. The venture promises to double the company's 12-strong, full-time Brackla workforce. The family-run Loch Ness Centre and Exhibition is seeking approval for enhanced access, retail and catering facilities and parking beside its Clansman Hotel. The plans include the Loch Ness and Caledonian Canal canoe trail and promise to create up to 40 peak-season jobs.

Read more: <http://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/Article.aspx/2096699?UserKey=#ixzz1BTP3rtfp>