



DANE COUNTY

Joe Parisi
County Executive

March 8, 2019

Tom Hanson, Chair
Henry Vilas Zoological Society
606 S. Randall Ave
Madison, WI 53715

Dear Tom:

Dane County is in receipt of your letter dated March 6, 2019. Your letter demonstrates that despite multiple discussions with our negotiating committee and a conference call with the AZA, the Henry Vilas Zoo Society remains hostile to the AZA's accreditation requirement that a support organization not exercise control over the operations of the Zoo. As a result, I don't believe further meetings will help advance the two entities toward an agreement, a goal that remains unachieved after ten months of dialogue. Instead, I suggest the Society review the County's most recent offer which contains the only structure that will permit our relationship to move forward productively.

The county's objective from the outset of this discussion has been to ensure the values and mission of the Henry Vilas Zoo are preserved. We are proud of our free Zoo and what it offers for families. It's important we align ourselves with partners who share in those values – the conservation and preservation of wildlife and the environments they inhabit. Also with this commitment, the Henry Vilas Zoo has a mission to create educational awareness and opportunities to fight one of the biggest threats facing our world's most precious assets, climate change. The county is increasingly concerned that the objectives of the Zoo and the private organization created to financially support it (the Society) no longer appear aligned.

If the Society's intent was truly to support the Zoo, dollars raised at the Zoo and in the name of the Zoo would go back to the Zoo. Instead, funds raised in recent years have gone to accounts inaccessible to the Zoo, without the Zoo's knowledge. The Society as a private organization is holding "closed session" meetings in publicly owned facilities, making decisions about where to direct dollars, and how many staff to hire and how much to pay those staff. Again, re-purposing funds the public believes are going to the care of the Zoo's animals. Over time, the Society has built an organizational chart that has more staff members than what the Zoo utilizes to run the entire Zoo. You can imagine our surprise when we learned in your letter that you have 68 employees that work for the Society. The Society's push to increase its own staff created artificial and inefficient demand for precious financial resources raised on Zoo grounds. In essence, the Society's financial decisions wed itself to commitments that compete against and preclude additional dollars needed to enhance our Zoo.

The Society had the financial willingness to invest robustly in its own non-profit organization. Through these ten months of negotiations however, the Society was only willing to give more money back to the actual Zoo if a series of conditions were met – conditions the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) told you and fellow board members on January 30, 2019 constituted the "worst" agreement they had "seen in 24 years."

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The Henry Vilas Zoo and AZA aren't interested in anyone's money that comes with an expectation that animals do public tricks or are exploited for feedings and private shows. On August 22nd you wrote: *"With the proposed additional support by the Society we are expecting greater animal availability, greater access to strategic behind the scenes opportunities to build critical donor support, regularly scheduled on-grounds animal training opportunities, increased number of young/baby animals, and a continuation of the emphasis on the upgrading of animal exhibits."*

Your organization's proposal amounted to creation of a carnival, instead of sanctuary for education on important matters of science such as climate change and species survival. Your letter neglects substantial context behind the Society's purported willingness to increase funding to the Zoo. There were strings attached and the AZA very clearly told you those strings would jeopardize the Zoo's accreditation.

Dane County set out with two very clear objectives when we began exploring extension of the two party's current five year agreement:

1. Explore ways to make our free community Zoo more accessible to families by being open later hours on weekdays and weekends.
2. Ensuring the Zoo and its hundreds of thousands of annual visitors benefit directly from the dollars raised on the Zoo grounds, being reinvested in the operation, consistent with the County's intention for partnering with the Society when the organization was founded. Unfortunately, after many months of meetings and dialogue and exploring many iterations of how to best accomplish these goals to the betterment of the Zoo and its visitors, neither objective has been accomplished.

By its own accounting, the Society has very successfully raised funds in the name of the Henry Vilas Zoo in recent years, accruing a savings account of well over \$6 million. Additionally, the Society also established an endowment fund inaccessible to the Zoo, a decision made unilaterally by your board without the consultation of Dane County's leadership. It's unacceptable that public grounds are being utilized to raise dollars for a fund in which financial transactions are made without transparency. Closed session meetings of the Society's board resulted in decisions being made about finances independent of Zoo or county management.

Over time, the Society has placed greater barriers to the Zoo receiving dollars being raised in its name. The County bolstered the Society's fundraising efforts by borrowing over \$1.94 million in 2014 to construct the Glacier Grille restaurant, a state of the art food and concessions facility opened in conjunction with the Arctic Passage. Over time, accessing the dollars raised in a county owned facility, on county grounds, somehow became a point of negotiation instead of being repurposed exclusively into Zoo operations as should have been our shared intent.

In light of the Society's financial position, transactional demands placed on requests for additional support of the actual Zoo were perplexing, casting the county into the incomprehensible position of bargaining to retrieve dollars for its own Zoo; dollars that were raised either physically at or in the community in the name of the Henry Vilas Zoo. The Society's insistence on these provisions led to the January 30th call with the AZA in which your board very clearly heard how what you were proposing jeopardized the accreditation of the Henry Vilas Zoo. **Had the two parties signed the Society's agreement, accreditation would be lost this year.**

Regardless the outcome of this negotiation, Dane County is 100% committed to remaining an AZA accredited facility and will make the investments necessary to do so.

Kids who take the time to save shoeboxes of coins to put in donation tubes at the Zoo deserve to know the money they saved went back to the animals those dimes and quarters were intended to help. Families buying lunch at Glacier Grille want proceeds from their burgers to help feed the polar bears later that month. Our Zoo is open to everyone, not just those with financial means. Over the course of our current agreement, the Society has requested use of Zoo grounds more frequently for invite only events for donors. These events are generally held after hours and require attendees to provide a donation. Occasionally alcohol is served. All of this is new territory for the Zoo and feels inconsistent with our charter mission of free family fun with a focus on conservation and education. This is why in our most recent proposal the county proposed taking responsibility of all on-ground concessions and operations to ensure money raised on Zoo grounds, stays on Zoo grounds.

In the event our negotiation doesn't culminate in an agreement, Dane County is prepared to provide the funds necessary to ensure this transition minimizes interruption to visitors at our Zoo. When complete, those who come to see our free Zoo and donate to it will be able to do so knowing with 100% certainty the dollars they're giving to support the care and well-being of these animals will go to the animals. Streamlining these operations through the very public and accessible county government processes is the best means of ensuring transparency for those who want to make sure their financial gift to the Zoo reaches its intended benefit. County revenues and expenses are reviewed annually by the community at public meetings and adjusted by county policymakers through the budget process.

It's with great pride Dane County invests over \$1.7 million each year to run the Henry Vilas Zoo. County policymakers increase funding to the finest free Zoo in the country each year because it's a destination for families to recreate while learning about conservation and species survival. This is incredibly important in an era where climate change is forever changing the make-up of wildlife and eco-systems across the globe.

For more than a century, the Henry Vilas Zoo has provided this community with laughs, learning, and countless memories. We look forward to the responsibility of preserving and enhancing this legacy and are grateful for the contributions of the Society. Business relationships and partnerships continuously evolve and through the challenges of change, opportunities always present themselves. If the proposal currently before you is not palatable to the Society, it's with that positive and hopeful spirit we say "thank you" and hope you will continue your individual support of the Henry Vilas Zoo.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Josh Wescott", written over a horizontal line.

Josh Wescott

Chief of Staff

Dane County Executive Office