



MINUTES

BOARD OF ZOO COMMISSIONERS OF THE CITY OF LOS ANGELES

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2025 – 10:00 AM

Los Angeles Zoo
Grand Room
5333 Zoo Drive
Los Angeles, Ca 90027

LOS ANGELES ZOO
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KAREN BASS
Mayor

NITHYA RAMAN
Council Member
4th District

ZOO
COMMISSIONERS

KAREN B. WINNICK
President

BERNARDO SILVA
Vice President

JUSTIN MIKITA

DARYL SMITH

ELNIE VANNATIM

MEMBERS PRESENT

Karen Winnick
Bernardo Silva
Justin Mikita
Daryl Smith arrived at 10:02
Elnie Vannatim arrived at 10:07

VISITORS

None signed in

COMMISSION STAFF

Denise Verret
Cristina Flores

MEDIA

None signed in

ZOO GENERAL COUNSEL

Steve Houchin

AGENDA ITEM 1 - CALL TO ORDER

Commission President Winnick called the meeting to order at 10:00AM.

AGENDA ITEM 2 - APPROVAL OF MINUTES FOR MEETING OF JULY 15, 2025

Commission President Winnick requested a Motion to approve the minutes of the July 15, 2025 meeting. Commission Vice President Silva so moved, Commissioner Mikita seconded. The motion passed by unanimous vote.

AGENDA ITEM 3 - GENERAL PUBLIC COMMENT

No Comments

NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL COMMENTS

No Comments

AGENDA ITEM 4 – PRESENTATION - LOS ANGELES ZOO STRATEGIC PLAN

Zoo Director Denise Verret gave the following presentation:

- Ms. Verret discussed the Los Angeles Zoo's new five-year strategic plan, developed in collaboration with Canopy Strategic Partners and guided by the Zoo's mission and vision.
- She walked the commissioners through the year-long planning process, which unfolded in four phases:
 - Discovery – assessing where the Zoo stands today.
 - Opportunities – gathering input from the community and stakeholders to explore where the Zoo could go.
 - Reality – using data to define the Zoo's most important priorities.

DENISE M. VERRET
Chief Executive Officer
& Zoo Director



AN EQUAL EMPLOYMENT
OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER

- Rollout – the current phase, focused on putting the plan into action.
- Ms. Verret noted that more than 250 voices—including staff, partners, and community members—helped shape the plan through surveys, interviews, and listening sessions.
- She explained that Canopy also developed a detailed profile of the Zoo, using data to understand trends in attendance, guest demographics, and market potential.
- Ms. Verret highlighted that most visitors come from within an hour's drive, with council districts 1, 4, 13, and 14 leading in attendance. The guest demographics reflect much of the City's diversity, though there's still room to grow.
- To frame the Zoo's transformation, she introduced the central theme of "Metamorphosis," symbolizing deep and meaningful change—physically, culturally, and operationally—while staying grounded in the Zoo's core commitments to animals, conservation, and education.
- She outlined four strategic priorities, each with focused goals:
 - Zoo Experience – Creating a welcoming, engaging, and memorable environment for guests.
 - Infrastructure – Addressing maintenance needs and building a more sustainable campus.
 - Community & Partnerships – Strengthening connections and building shared capacity.
 - Team & Culture – Fostering trust, collaboration, and staff recognition.
- Ms. Verret shared that the Zoo is now working on detailed year-one tactics and performance metrics to track progress and stay accountable.
- She closed with a quote from a community partner who described the Zoo as essential to Los Angeles much like the stadium or observatory and expressed hope that others will come to feel the same.

AGENDA ITEM 5 - PRESENTATION – LOS ANGELES ZOO MEMBERSHIP, SPECIAL EVENTS AND PUBLICATIONS PROGRAM

Jake Pugh, SSA Group, Senior Vice President of Operations West gave the following presentation:

- Mr. Pugh introduced himself as part of the SSA Group, noting his long-standing relationship with the LA Zoo, which began over 13 years ago.
- He provided context on SSA Group, a hospitality company specializing in services for zoos and aquariums, with nearly 90 partnerships nationwide and over 50 years in the industry.
- Mr. Pugh shared the company's origins at 452 Leiden Street in Denver, where it began with a handshake deal folding Broncos programs—a symbol of their values: trust, hospitality, and a family-first approach.
- He emphasized SSA's alignment with the Zoo's mission and highlighted key values: true hospitality, innovation, inclusivity, curiosity, and multi-generational leadership.
- Mr. Pugh reflected on SSA's long history with the LA Zoo since 1997, providing food, retail, tram, and catering services, and partnering on projects like Zoo Lights and the recent addition of Pink's Hot Dogs.
- He introduced three new service areas SSA began managing as of July 1, 2025:
 - Membership Program – Now overseeing not only sales but also fulfillment, strategy, and value-added experiences.

- Events & Public Programming – Expanding traditional events (e.g., Boo at the Zoo) and private venue experiences, while developing new, mission-aligned programming to attract broader audiences.
- Publications – Launching and managing content for *Zoo View*, *Zooscape*, *The GNUS*, and supporting key initiatives like the annual report and conservation strategic plan annual report.
- He shared that these efforts are supported by full-time SSA team members dedicated to guest services, membership, content, and event coordination.
- Mr. Pugh discussed forward-looking initiatives, including:
 - A mobile app partnership with Attractions.io to improve guest navigation, pre-ordering, and real-time updates.
 - An AI-powered tool called Scout, designed to assess the guest experience and operational flow using real-time inputs.
 - A unified Guest Experience Program, focused on seamless, high-quality interactions across all Zoo and SSA staff.
- Mr. Pugh closed with a joint call to action created during a recent leadership gathering with the SSA and Zoo teams, reinforcing their shared dedication to guest experience, infrastructure, community, partnerships, and culture.

AGENDA ITEM 6 - GENERAL MANAGER REPORTS

a. Animal Updates

Misha Body, Deputy Director of Animal Programs provided updates which included the following:

- Ms. Body introduced the Tamar wallabies, describing them as one of the smallest species of wallabies and members of the macropod family—a term meaning "big foot."
- She explained that, like other ground-dwelling macropods, Tamar wallabies are highly efficient hoppers, storing energy in their tendons with each jump to reduce exertion.
- Ms. Body highlighted the species' impressive adaptations to hot, arid climates:
 - They cool themselves by licking their arms.
 - They conserve water by reabsorbing it before urinating or defecating.
 - They are even able to drink seawater, providing an extra hydration source in dry environments.
- She described their unique reproductive process, noting that joeys are born less than a gram in size—about the size of a jellybean—and crawl into the mother's pouch to continue developing.
- Ms. Body shared that joeys typically stay in the pouch for 6 to 8 months, and the Zoo's most recent joey, now about 7.5 months old, can be seen hopping around and still trying to return to the pouch.
- She offered a brief history of Tamar wallabies at the LA Zoo:
 - First cared for from 1966 to 1973.
 - After a period with swamp wallabies, the Zoo welcomed Tamar wallabies back in 1997 with a breeding pair that quickly produced a joey.
- Ms. Body proudly noted that the Zoo has welcomed 30 joeys since then, including the newest one, currently visible in the Australia section

b. Zoo Director Updates

Denise Verret, Zoo Director gave the following updates:

Community Engagement

- The Zoo's Learning & Engagement team hosted a booth at Ciclavia Culver City/Venice, reaching nearly 800 visitors with messages about conservation, urban wildlife, and coexistence.
- For the second year, the Zoo welcomed youth (ages 7–14) from the Tataviam Band of Mission Indians for a visit focused on conservation practices and zoo careers.

Community Partnerships

- A new sustainability collaboration with The Huntington repurposes deadheaded roses for animal enrichment, offering olfactory and dietary stimulation for herbivores.
- Councilmember Tim McOsker recognized the Zoo on the 20th anniversary of Reggie the Alligator's first sighting in Lake Machado, spotlighting Reggie's ambassador role and raising awareness about the risks of illegal pet ownership.

International Relations

- The Zoo hosted representatives from Korea's Animal Hygiene Laboratory Office, highlighting best practices in wildlife care, veterinary medicine, and zoonotic disease prevention.

Zoo Program Transition Update

- SSA debuted a new Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf truck near Reggie's habitat, offering guests a new amenity that's already proving popular.

Zoo Monthly Data

- Attendance: July attendance exceeded projections, but August saw a sharp decline—likely due to early school starts (e.g. LAUSD on Aug 14). Member attendance remains steady at around 30% of total visitors.
- Membership: Member households have grown by about 200 since July 1, totaling 31,120. Most popular tiers are Family, Family Deluxe, and Individual Plus.
- Revenue: Despite the August dip, revenue is at 96% of year-to-date budget, with optimism around fall events like Boo at the Zoo and LA Zoo Lights to help close the gap.

Zoo in the News

- The Huntington partnership received strong media coverage, including a CBS feature.
- The arrival of the Tasmanian devils was covered by LA Times, KPCC, and CBS Mornings.
- Dr. Jake Owens appeared on KCRW to discuss illegal wildlife trafficking and the Zoo's role as a partner in the Wildlife Trafficking Alliance.
- The Zoo's Motus wildlife tracking station partnership with Pasadena Audubon Society also earned media attention, highlighting the Zoo's conservation technology efforts.

AGENDA ITEM 7 - OLD BUSINESS

None

ADJOURNMENT

There being no more business to come before the Commission, President Winnick requested a motion to adjourn the meeting; Commissioner Smith so moved and Commissioner Vannatim seconded; the motion passed by unanimous vote and the meeting was adjourned at 11:12 AM.

ATTEST:

PRESIDENT

SECRETARY