



MINUTES

BOARD OF ZOO COMMISSIONERS OF THE CITY OF LOS ANGELES

TUESDAY, JANUARY 20, 2026 – 10:00 AM

Los Angeles Zoo
Grand Room
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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

DENISE M. VERRET
Chief Executive Officer
& Zoo Director



AN EQUAL EMPLOYMENT
OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER

MEMBERS PRESENT

Karen Winnick
Bernardo Silva
Justin Mikita
Daryl Smith - Absent
Elnie Vannatim – arrived at 10:11

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 DECEMBER 16, 2025

Commission President Winnick requested a Motion to approve the minutes of the December 16, 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 – 2026 LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT PLAN

Dan Keeffe, Director of Learning and Engagement, provided the following presentation:

Mr. Keeffe discussed the 2026 Learning and Engagement Plan, explaining that it is an annual operational plan required for Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) accreditation and is designed to keep the Zoo prepared for re-accreditation. He noted that the plan differs from long-term strategic plans in that it focuses on yearly programming, operations, and evaluation, and serves both as a public-facing document and an internal planning tool for the Learning and Engagement Division.

Mr. Keeffe provided an overview of the Learning and Engagement Division, which includes approximately a dozen full-time staff across guest engagement, community programs, K–career partnerships, graphics, and audio-visual services. He explained that the division oversees volunteer programming, daily on-grounds experiences, Zoo Camp, community outreach, school-to-career partnerships, all on-grounds signage and graphics, and audio visual support for meetings and animal care.

Mr. Keeffe described the Division’s approach to conservation education as fostering lasting relationships between communities and nature, with an emphasis on connection and engagement rather than information delivery. He shared that programs are developed using defined strategies and logic models with measurable outcomes focused on empathy, curiosity, and trust in the Zoo as a community resource.

Mr. Keeffe reviewed major programs for the year, including Flamingo Mingle, Zoo Pals, an early childhood pilot program, Muriel’s Ranch, Measure A Safari Days, educational field trips, Zoo Camp, and the Duttonhaver Conservation Field Studies program. He also highlighted partnerships with LA Unified School District and the LA County Office of Education, volunteer-led docent tours, community outreach, special events support, and career-focused initiatives such as the Girls in STEM Festival and college internship collaborations.

Mr. Keeffe explained that all programs include some level of evaluation and that the full plan aligns all Learning and Engagement programs with the Zoo’s strategic plan and City metrics. He discussed ongoing graphics work, including the replacement of animal identification signage with a new seven-language format, updated campus maps, and signage prioritization based on condition and safety.

Mr. Keeffe concluded by discussing updates to the docent training program, noting that it has shifted from a 19-week course to a modular structure organized by animal groups, allowing participants to engage with guests more quickly.

AGENDA ITEM 5 - GENERAL MANAGER REPORTS

a. Animal Updates

Dominick Dorsa, Director of Animal Care provided updates which included the following:

Mr. Dorsa shared that five Mexican lance-headed rattlesnakes were born at the Zoo in the past month. He explained that this venomous species is native to the central Mexican plateau and inhabits forest, shrubland, and grassland habitats, much of which overlaps with areas of high human population density. As a result, the species has been extirpated from much of its historical range but persists in some localized areas in Mexico.

Mr. Dorsa noted that the Mexican lance-headed rattlesnake is relatively rare in U.S. zoological collections and is managed under an AZA studbook, with only eight AZA institutions currently holding the species. He shared that the L.A. Zoo has maintained this species since 2005 and has had multiple successful births over the years, totaling 21 births to date, including the five most recent hatchlings. He concluded by noting that the Zoo currently has one breeding pair and five offspring.

b. Zoo Director Updates

Denise Verret, Zoo Director gave the following updates:

- Community Engagement

- In mid-December, the Zoo hosted representatives from Pelicanus, a conservation-focused nonprofit, on a tour led by Director of Conservation Dr. Jake Owens.
- Pelicanus produces conservation-focused podcasts highlighting positive impact through science, and its leadership includes a U.S. Geological Survey biologist who is involved in the southern mountain yellow-legged frog conservatiob program.
- The group had a highly positive experience and expressed interest in future podcast collaborations featuring the Zoo's conservation work.
- Community Partnership
 - The Zoo continued its partnership with LA Sanitation and Environment to recycle Christmas trees, a program in place since 2017.
 - A total of 113 Christmas trees were dropped off and sustainably composted at the Zoo's far north parking lot.
 - A holiday partnership with Santa and Sons, an Oregon-based Christmas tree farm, provided approximately 40 Christmas trees for animal enrichment.
 - The enrichment supported natural behaviors across multiple species and was well received.
- Special Events
 - L.A. Zoo Lights Pride Night was held on January 8 in partnership with LA Pride.
 - The event marked its third year and welcomed more than 1,000 members of the LGBTQIA+ community, along with family, friends, and allies.
 - The event received strong positive feedback and community appreciation.
 - Pride Night received positive media coverage from WeHo Times and Fox 11 News.
- Monthly Data
 - December attendance exceeded 153,000 visitors, reaching 73% of the monthly goal, with year-to-date attendance at approximately 562,000 (77% of goal).
 - Cold and rainy weather negatively impacted attendance during peak holiday and Zoo Lights days.
 - Improved weather over the recent three-day holiday weekend resulted in nearly 22,000 visitors, providing optimism for upcoming months.
 - Membership households totaled approximately 28,980, consistent with December levels, with family and family deluxe categories remaining the largest segments.
 - December revenue was nearly \$1.5 million, with year-to-date revenue just over \$8.6 million, representing 83% of budgeted projections.
 - Attendance and revenue are expected to improve with favorable weather and scheduled events for the remainder of the fiscal year.
 - The Vision Plan lawsuit has been settled, approved by City Council, and dismissed by the court, allowing implementation to move forward as funding becomes available.

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 Mikita so moved and Commissioner Vannatim seconded; the motion passed by unanimous vote and the meeting was adjourned at 10:47 AM.

ATTEST:

PRESIDENT

SECRETARY