



MINUTES

BOARD OF ZOO COMMISSIONERS OF THE CITY OF LOS ANGELES

TUESDAY, APRIL 21, 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
Elnie Vannatim – arrived at 10:09

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 MARCH 17, 2026

Commission President Winnick requested a Motion to approve the minutes of the March 17, 2026 meeting. Commission Vice President Silva so moved, Commissioner Smith seconded. The motion passed by unanimous vote.

AGENDA ITEM 3 - GENERAL PUBLIC COMMENT

No Comments

NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL COMMENTS

No Comments

AGENDA ITEM 4 – PRESENTATION – CALIFORNIA NATIVE GARDEN PROGRAMING

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

Mr. Keefe opened by noting that the Zoo added over 50,000 square feet of native gardens recently, specifically focusing on Project Pollinator HQ and the

California Gateway Garden. He explained that these spaces help achieve the Zoo's vision of sustainability by moving guests from a place of fear to one of curiosity regarding local wildlife.

He reported that over 13,000 people have participated in Project Pollinator HQ programs, including nature journaling and butterfly crafts that support monarch conservation efforts. Mr. Keefe also detailed the partnership with the Los Angeles Public Library for Story Walks, where disassembled picture books are placed on boards to encourage literacy and habitat education. *Señorita Mariposa* is a bilingual children's picture book that follows a monarch butterfly's journey from Canada to Mexico which is featured at the Zoo's Story Walk in the Winnick Family Children's Zoo.

He shared results from a pilot program with Mount Washington Elementary School second graders, who tested how to align garden activities with state science standards. He reported that the students remained engaged in their "sit spots" for over an hour, proving the Gateway Garden is an effective, high-capacity educational space. Mr. Keefe concluded that while the garden easily accommodated 70 students, the pilot reinforced that these programs still require significant staff facilitation to be successful.

AGENDA ITEM 5 - L.A. ZOO OAK WOODLAND RESTORATION PROJECT: CREATING PATHWAYS TO CAREERS AND CONSERVATION

Dr. Jake Owens, Director of Conservation, provided the following presentation:

Dr. Jake Owens began the presentation by framing the Oak Woodland Restoration and Career Pathways project within the Zoo's Conservation Strategic Plan, specifically focusing on California conservation, evidence-based research, and social justice pillars of the Plan.

He highlighted the critical partnership with Outward Bound Adventures (OBA), an organization dedicated to providing green career opportunities for individuals from underrepresented or high-impact communities, such as those affected by incarceration or poverty.

Dr. Owens noted that the project is supported by a \$3.6 million grant from the Wildlife Conservation Board, marking a significant investment in utilizing the Zoo campus as a "living laboratory" for habitat restoration and professional training.

Ms. Courtney Vargas, provided a technical overview of the six-acre restoration site, explaining that the project employs 13 members of OBA's Environmental Restoration Team who gain hands-on experience in plant identification, bird surveys, and data collection.

She detailed the experimental design of the project, which utilizes 32 test plots to compare varying levels of restoration effort, with the ultimate goal of publishing these findings to assist other community-led oak woodland projects.

Ms. Vargas emphasized the career development aspect of the project, mentioning that team members have received guidance from the City Personnel Department on the "Bridge to Jobs" programs and are currently earning certifications through the Theodore Payne Foundation.

She shared the success of a recent internship program with USC students, noting that the immersion in the oak woodlands was so impactful that several participants modified their majors to focus on conservation careers.

Regarding physical progress, Ms. Vargas reported that the team has installed over 550 native plants and 28 pounds of seed, while also removing invasive species and 3,000 feet of obsolete irrigation pipe.

She showcased wildlife monitoring footage that captured owls, bobcats, and raccoons utilizing the site, noting that the habitat is already contributing to regional bird migration data through a specialized tracking tower.

Ms. Vargas concluded by outlining future steps, including welcoming nine new summer interns and initiating reciprocal learning exchanges with the Fernandeño Tataviam Band of Mission Indians regarding traditional land management and fire safety.

AGENDA ITEM 6 - GENERAL MANAGER REPORTS

a. Animal Updates

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

Mr. Dorsa presented the monthly animal transfer list, specifically highlighting the recent birth of an endangered Grevy's zebra at the Zoo. He explained that the Zoo works closely with the AZA Species Survival Plan (SSP) to manage the genetic health of the approximately 100 Grevy's zebras currently residing in accredited institutions.

He shared that the pairing of zebras Lily and Eric resulted in the birth of a male foal on March 31, 2026, noting that both mother and offspring are doing well. Mr. Dorsa reported that the foal is currently being kept with his mother and away from the father, a standard practice to ensure the health and safety of the newborn.

He informed the Commission that the public can expect to see the foal on habitat in a few weeks, once the physical space has been fully prepared for his debut.

He provided historical context for the program, noting that the Zoo's involvement with Grevy's zebras began in 1984 with just three individuals. Mr. Dorsa concluded by stating that since the first zebra birth occurred at the Zoo in 1988, the institution has seen a total of 23 zebras and seven successful births.

b. Zoo Director Updates

Denise Verret, Zoo Director gave the following updates:

Community Outreach & Engagement

- Ms. Verret reported on the Learning and Engagement team's participation in the La Brea Tar Pits STEAM Family Day, which reached over 750 guests and highlighted career pathways in science and technology.
- She noted the zoo's continued involvement in the historic "Blessing of the Animals" event at El Pueblo, where staff engaged nearly 600 community members with educational exhibits centered on spring and renewal.
- The director highlighted the 10th annual "Engaging Girls in STEM" event hosted at the zoo, where 200 middle and high school students were mentored by 50 professional women.
- She commended Curator Byron for his recent media collaborations with LA City View and Recreation and Parks to provide the public with essential rattlesnake awareness and safety tips for Griffith Park.

Special Events

- Ms. Verret announced the return of Dia de los Niños on May 2nd and 3rd, featuring bilingual storytelling by Zoo Magnet students and traditional Mexican cultural performances.
- She shared that the "LA Zoo Bloom" kickoff weekends were highly successful, drawing over 33,000 visitors and generating significant positive coverage across major local news outlets.
- The director discussed a new sustainability partnership with Climate Resolve that utilized "cool paint" technology to renovate the zoo's retail entrance, helping to reflect heat and lower energy costs.
- She celebrated the birth of a Cape vulture chick—the first at the zoo in seven years—and credited the 2025 naturalistic habitat renovations for the successful breeding.

Zoo Data

- Ms. Verret reported that March attendance reached 108,738 guests; while this was 72% of the monthly projection, it reflects a broader national trend of downward attendance across many accredited zoos.
- She explained that the Zoo is troubleshooting these lower figures by deploying new discounting strategies to address potential economic barriers for local families.
- The Director noted a successful recovery in membership households, which rose to 27,877 in early May following a targeted marketing campaign to re-engage lapsed members.
- She confirmed that March revenue for admissions, concessions, and membership totaled \$1.8 million, bringing the year-to-date total to \$11.8 million.
- Ms. Verret concluded by assuring the Commission that despite revenue being at 81% of the budget, the Zoo will remain fiscally balanced by the end of the year through careful expenditure management.

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. Commission Vice President Silva so moved and Commissioner Mikita seconded; the motion passed by unanimous vote and the meeting was adjourned at 10:54 AM.

ATTEST:

PRESIDENT

SECRETARY