



MINUTES

BOARD OF ZOO COMMISSIONERS OF THE CITY OF LOS ANGELES

TUESDAY, JUNE 16, 2026 – 10:00 AM

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

LOS ANGELES ZOO
5333 Zoo Drive
Los Angeles, CA 90027

Phone (323) 644-4200
Fax (323) 662-9786
www.lazoo.org

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 - Absent
Justin Mikita - Absent
Daryl Smith
Elnie Vannatim

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 10:09AM.

AGENDA ITEM 2 - APPROVAL OF MINUTES FOR MEETING OF APRIL 21, 2026

Commission President Winnick requested a Motion to approve the minutes of the April 21, 2026 meeting. Commissioner Smith so moved, Commissioner Vannatim seconded. The motion passed by unanimous vote.

AGENDA ITEM 3 - GENERAL PUBLIC COMMENT

No Comments

NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL COMMENTS

No Comments

AGENDA ITEM 4 – PRESENTATION – L.A. ZOO VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

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

Mr. Keeffe opened by highlighting the volunteer program's transition since the Zoo assumed management from GLAZA, noting that nearly 340 active volunteers contributed over 40,000 hours across 70+ distinct assignments in the first three quarters, and clarifying that the minimum age to volunteer is 14 with parental consent required for those under 18.

DENISE M. VERRET
Chief Executive Officer
& Zoo Director



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He outlined that program management is structured around the "Three Rs" (Recognition, Retention, and Recruitment) and deeply rooted in the Zoo's core conservation mission, noting appreciation efforts like a city-wide thank-you video featuring the Mayor and daily pancake breakfasts served by senior leadership during Volunteer Appreciation Week.

Mr. Keeffe shared a social media spotlight video featuring Charlene, a retired volunteer of three and a half years, who expressed her appreciation for the food prep and orangutan watch programs, praised the deep dedication of the keepers, and characterized the volunteer community as a "wonderful family."

He detailed transition and accessibility adjustments made to ensure a seamless shift from GLAZA, which included preserving all original volunteer service dates, manually matching new software login numbers to past IDs to maintain "muscle memory," and removing the paid zoo membership requirement for docents to increase financial accessibility to volunteering at the Zoo.

He noted that general volunteers have been rebranded as "Core Volunteers" to emphasize their value, with their efforts now focused primarily on guest greeting and wayfinding at the entry promenade.

Mr. Keeffe introduced Docent Class Administrator Donna Foster, who shared updates on the modernized 19-week docent training curriculum, noting its transition from a rigid UCLA-based zoology course to an accessible, LA Zoo-specific modular framework that increases conservation hours from 1 to 10, raises keeper talks from 6 to 17, adds six public engagement strategies, and incorporates tactile teaching tools like a cashew-sized embryonic marsupial "bio-pack."

He noted that nearly 50 new Core Volunteers are currently undergoing mentoring and the first new animal care volunteers since April 2024 have been onboarded. Mr. Keeffe introduced incoming Docent Chair Heidi Burkner, who outlined the docent office's dual focus on touring (including school, monthly member, college, and VIP tours) and ambassadoring on the grounds to share conservation and adaptation stories.

He concluded the presentation by sharing a volunteer testimonial email stating that "many of us feel the LA Zoo is the best place to volunteer," while expressing gratitude to all zoo divisions and offering special praise to Volunteer Program Manager Maura Messerly for her outstanding day-to-day coordination.

AGENDA ITEM 5 – ANNUAL BUDGET PRESENTATION

Denise Verret, Zoo Director, provided the following presentation:

Ms. Verret opened by presenting the \$34.4 million adopted budget for fiscal year 2026–27 an 11% (\$3.3 million) increase over the previous year which supports 256 full-time positions, provides \$8.5 million for capital infrastructure, and features a \$4.3 million General Fund allocation (a 653% increase from the prior year's \$582,000).

She projected fiscal year attendance at 1.4 million, explaining that revenue will remain flat despite a general admission fee increase due to capacity limits from the DWP solar parking lot project set to begin in August.

She noted that animal well-being and conservation represent the largest portion of the budget allocation, followed by capital programs, visitor engagement, and administration.

She highlighted several strategic plan priorities funded by the budget, including increased resources for animal care supplies, the launch of Conservation Strategic Plan 2.0, the year-round re-establishment of the "flamingo mingle" program and deferred maintenance funding to transform the old, closed bear exhibit into a new Red Panda habitat.

She concluded by outlining key implementation focuses for the upcoming year, which include closely monitoring the impacts of the fee increase, driving attendance during construction, and preparing the zoo's application for AZA accreditation due in Fall 2027.

AGENDA ITEM 6

a. Animal Updates

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

Mr. Dorsa opened by providing an update on the Zoo's pair of snow leopards and their participation in the AZA Species Survival Plan (SSP), announcing the birth of three cubs (one male and two females) on May 8, 2026, which marks the institution's first snow leopard litter in nine years.

He noted that a three-cub litter is atypical for the species, which usually produces two, and shared that the mother, Malaya who was also the mother of the Zoo's last litter nine years ago, delivered the third cub about 20 to 30 minutes after the first two.

He commended the collaborative efforts of the animal keepers and health teams, highlighting that Malaya voluntarily participates in her own healthcare, allowing staff to perform regular exams and check her milk production seamlessly and without the need for stressful separation or anesthesia.

b. Zoo Director Updates

Denise Verret, Zoo Director gave the following updates:

• Community Outreach & Engagement

- The Learning and Engagement team participated in the Lincoln Heights Earth Day celebration, focusing on sustainability and environmental education, where staff successfully engaged with over 320 community members.
- The Zoo concluded this fiscal year's Betty White Zoo Pals program, which served 2,534 students from 43 unique schools across 13 of the 15 city council districts and other areas of Los Angeles County.
- Staff completed the final year of the three-year Measure A LA County Recreation Access grant, exceeding the initial goal of 30,000 by serving 30,511 LAUSD students from high-need areas; the next opportunity to reapply for this grant cycle will begin in Fall 2027.
- The Zoo presented career pathways and volunteer opportunities to over 400 young Angelenos at the City's 4th Annual Youth Expo, hosted by the Youth Development Department.
- Curator of Education Rosalio Rubio visited the International Studies Learning Center in Southgate, engaging over 250 high school students regarding careers in the zoo and aquarium field and utilizing virtual reality goggles to demonstrate wildlife conservation work.
- The Zoo announced the launch of its summer evening themed music series, which will feature Throwback Night, Salsa Night (with live dance lessons), 80's Night, and Country Line Dance Night.

- **Zoo Data**

- **Attendance:** May attendance reached 123,741 guests, bringing the year-to-date total to nearly 1.1 million, which represents approximately 80% of budgeted projections.
- **Membership:** As of June 1, membership households stood at 24,241, with "Family" and "Family Deluxe" remaining the largest participation categories. Retention strategies moving into year two include targeted mailings and Father's Day promotions.
- **Revenue:** Combined revenue from admissions, concessions, and memberships for May totaled over \$1.9 million, bringing the year-to-date revenue to nearly \$17 million, approximately 80% of the budget. Despite tracking at 80%, the Zoo is projected to end the fiscal year with a balanced budget.

- **Zoo in the News**

- CBS LA broadcasted an exclusive story highlighting the Zoo's conservation and habitat restoration partnership with Outward Bound Adventures, featuring interviews with Dr. Jake Owens and Executive Director Charles Thomas.
- The Zoo celebrated the 60th anniversary of Topa Topa, a historic California condor who has sired or mentored roughly 300 birds for the federal recovery program, collaborating on a highly viewed feature with the *LA Times* 404 social media platform to target a younger demographic.
- A national CBS Evening News Mother's Day segment highlighted the Zoo's "Great Ape baby boom," featuring interviews with Curator of Mammals Candace Scimmenti and Senior Animal Keeper Megan Fox that reached a televised audience of over 4.7 million viewers.
- Earned media successes included a KTLA Channel 5 broadcast story regarding the reintroduction of two yearling southern gerenuk to their adult herd that the Zoo announced via social media. The post garnered over 4,000 views and reached over 3,000 people on Instagram and over 3,500 views on Facebook. The KTLA-5 story converted this shared story into an earned media story garnering more positive exposure for the Zoo which is a testament to how social media can work hand-in-hand to become earned media.
- The Zoo sent out a press release announcing the public debut of our male Zebra Foal which generated significant positive media coverage for the Zoo and penetrated for great saturation of the local market with a total of 79 stories, including 57 broadcast stories with an audience of over 31 million viewers. Media coverage included KTLA-5, KABC-7, KCBS-2, KTTV-11 FOX, NPR News, Los Angeles Magazine, The Los Angeles Daily News and Yahoo!

- **Mail Bag**

- Ms. Verret shared a letter from Kane Richard Kota, a 26-year-old guest with autism from Bakersfield, who detailed his lifelong love for the Zoo, shared fond memories of past resident animals, and enclosed a personal drawing of the legacy Zoo logo.
- The Zoo also received a message of gratitude from the "Blackberry classroom" at Cassidy Preschool in Santa Monica, thanking the zookeepers for their service as vital community helpers and enclosing a hand-drawn illustration of a keeper by a preschooler named Mark.

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 Vannatim so moved and Commissioner Smith seconded; the motion passed by unanimous vote and the meeting was adjourned at 11:08 AM.

ATTEST:

PRESIDENT

SECRETARY