



MINUTES

BOARD OF ZOO COMMISSIONERS OF THE CITY OF LOS ANGELES

TUESDAY, AUGUST 18, 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

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 10:07 AM

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 10:00 AM.

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

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

AGENDA ITEM 3 - GENERAL PUBLIC COMMENT

No Comments

NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL COMMENTS

No Comments

AGENDA ITEM 4 - ELECTION OF OFFICERS

Vice President Silva nominated Karen Winnick for President, the motion passed unanimously.

President Winnick nominated Vice President Silva for Vice President, the motion passed unanimously.

AGENDA ITEM 5 – PRESENTATION DUTTENHAVER CONSERVATION FIELD STUDY PROGRAM

Rachel Helfing, Curator of Education, provided the following presentation:

Ms. Helfing introduced the Duttenhaver Conservation Field Study (DCFS) presentation, explaining that the program, funded by Linda Duttonhaver since 2008, is for 17- to 18-year-old Zoo Magnet, Zoo Volunteer, and Teen Council participants. This year's program sent nine students and two mentors to perform habitat restoration at Kenya's Enarau Conservation Trust in the Greater Maasai Mara.

Ms. Helfing described the conservancy's work restoring abandoned farmland for shared wildlife, eco-tourism, and Maasai cattle grazing, confirming that the land sits along the wildebeest migration path and that the conservancy aims to expand threefold over the next 10 years.

Mr. Kevin Copley, Senior Keeper of the Australia section, detailed the group's field achievements, which included conducting seven bird transects (1,581 birds observed across 101 species) and six mammal transects (191 wild mammals observed across 6 species).

The team logged 66 camera-trapping days (recording 7,201 wildlife detections across 14 species), potted 2,970 seedling bags, planted 1,100 native seedlings, removed invasive plants like *Gypsophila*, and relocated a heavy mobile boma to restore soil through cattle grazing.

Mr. Copley highlighted cultural visits to a Maasai manyatta, recreational games with local youth, close encounters with protected white rhinos, and the historic return of two bull elephants to the conservancy area for the first time in over 30 years.

Student participants shared how the experience shaped their future goals:

- AJ noted that walking near white rhinos inspired her to pursue environmental law at USC;
- Joey highlighted how the return of elephants demonstrated the critical role of community-led conservation; and
- Jenna stated that working alongside researchers solidified her plan to study field research at Brigham Young University.

Mr. Copley added that conservancy leadership was so impressed by the group's work that they are discussing opening the facility to future student groups.

Ms. Helfing affirmed strong local community buy-in for the conservancy's ongoing growth.

AGENDA ITEM 6 – CONSERVATION SUMMER INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

Anna Becker, Community Conservation Coordinator, provided the following presentation:

Ms. Becker introduced the Zoo's sixth annual eight-week Conservation Summer Internship Program, reporting that this year's six interns from USC and new partner Los Angeles Valley College brought the program's cumulative impact since 2021 to 54 interns and over 10,800 service hours.

Ms. Becker outlined the program's core curriculum, which equips students with field research skills such as GPS tracking, camera trapping, transects, and soil sampling, while exposing them to diverse career pathways through Zoo staff mentorship and field trips with Friends of the Los Angeles River and the Autry Museum.

Ms. Becker detailed the cohort's three research projects in the Zoo's Oak Woodland Restoration Area:

- Nevin's Barberry Propagation: Evaluated rooting hormone concentrations and light exposure levels to determine optimal propagation conditions for the endangered Nevin's barberry (*Mahonia nevinii*).
- Ground Squirrel Burrow Impact: Analyzed soil properties and vegetation cover around active California ground squirrel burrows, confirming minimal negative impact on soil health or oak trees.
- Arachnid Diversity & Microclimate: Examined how restoration intensity affects soil conditions, finding that higher-tiered plot restoration increases soil moisture and lowers surface temperatures, which directly boosts arachnid presence.

Ms. Becker noted that the internship culminates in a formal scientific poster presentation where interns share their research methodologies and findings with Zoo staff, volunteers, and family.

Malia, a USC senior studying environmental science and health, shared reflections on her ground squirrel research project and field trips, noting that gaining hands-on conservation experience and learning about programs like California condor recovery gave her the skills and confidence to pursue a career in environmental conservation.

Ms. Becker concluded with program evaluation data, noting significant post-internship increases in participants' sense of belonging in conservation and self-efficacy, and added that alumni regularly advance into life science research, STEM education, veterinary medicine, and employment or volunteer roles at the LA Zoo.

AGENDA ITEM 7

a. Animal Updates

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

Mr. Dorsa reported the birth of a male Sifaka infant at the Zoo on July 4.

Mr. Dorsa noted that Sifakas, lemurs native to Madagascar, are challenging to manage in human care, highlighting that the LA Zoo has housed 28 Sifakas and recorded 21 births since 1980.

Mr. Dorsa emphasized the Zoo's significant contribution to the AZA Sifaka population, adding that he personally worked with LA Zoo-born Sifakas at two other facilities prior to returning to Los Angeles.

b. Zoo Director Updates

Denise Verret, Zoo Director gave the following updates:

Community Engagement

- The Learning and Engagement team engaged with over 300 community members during Council District 12's National Night Out event.
- Ms. Verret highlighted the culmination ceremony for the summer LAUSD Migrant Education Program partnership, where 32 participating students and nearly 80 family members gathered for student art project presentations interpreting wildlife habitats and enrichment.

Learning and Engagement - Zoo Camp

- Ms. Verret summarized the conclusion of summer Zoo Camp, which reached 100% capacity with 890 campers and awarded 121 full-week scholarships funded by the Betty White Foundation.
- She noted program highlights, including "Splash Safari" water play and the Zoo Camp Academy overnight program for 5th through 8th graders.
- In response to a commissioner question regarding program expansion, Ms. Verret clarified that capacity is limited by physical classroom space rather than scholarship funding.

Guest Experiences

- Ms. Verret reported that the Zoo debuted new guest celebration buttons for birthdays, anniversaries, and first-time visits, which saw immediate, high guest demand.
- She shared that the Zoo completed a full aesthetic renovation of the restroom adjacent to Pink's in partnership with the Department of General Services.
- She reported that the summer "Zoo After Dark" evening series concluded successfully, drawing over 2,400 attendees across its final 1980s and Country music nights.

Zoo Data

- The July attendance was approximately 70,000 against a 95,000 projection, Ms. Verret noted that high temperatures and local FIFA events impacted numbers, though member attendance exceeded 15,000.
- She reported that despite lower attendance, overall revenue for admissions, concessions, and memberships exceeded budgeted projections by 19%.
- She noted a slight drop in total member households and highlighted that August was designated as Member Appreciation Month to support retention and growth.

Zoo in the News

- Ms. Verret announced the public debut of four Boer goat kids in the Winnick Family Children's Zoo contact yard, acquired through a partnership with Covina High School's Future Farmers of America program.

AGENDA ITEM 6 - 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 Vannatim seconded; the motion passed by unanimous vote and the meeting was adjourned at 11:13AM

ATTEST:

PRESIDENT

SECRETARY