



Public Testimony Operating Budget
Friday, May 8, 2009
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Good morning Madam President and Members of City Council. My name is Marianne Bessey. I represent the Philadelphia Chapter of the League of Humane Voters as well as the local group Friends of Philly Zoo Elephants and I am here to testify about concerns regarding the City funding of the Philadelphia Zoo. We are concerned that the Philadelphia Zoo has been taking in millions of public monies in various public subsidies while refusing to be accountable or responsive to public concerns.

In this time of recession and budget cuts, it is particularly important to expose as much waste, fraud and inefficiencies in city funding as possible – in order to save taxpayer's money.

City Council every year approves through your budget process, millions of dollars of financial support for the privately run Zoo through

- (1) water subsidies
- (2) sewer and sanitation subsidies.
- (3) The private Zoo rents the city-owned 42-acre site within Fairmount Park for just \$1.00 a year.
- (4) the Zoo receives millions more in funding for capital improvements to Zoo facilities, varying year to year.

As a publicly-funded entity, the Philadelphia Zoo *must be held accountable* for receiving public funds. Publicly-funded entities must be responsive to public inquiries and must operate with transparency. In addition, if an entity wants to benefit from public financing it should also be willing to respond to public concerns on all issues. In our experience, the Philadelphia Zoo has failed to do any of these things.

(First failure on the zoo to be accountable) For over two years, citizens of Philadelphia have asked the Philadelphia Zoo to take action regarding the elephants at the Zoo. Among other things, local citizens circulated petitions and obtained over 10,000 signatures in support of sending the elephants to a sanctuary and permanently closing the elephant exhibit.

SHOW THE PETITIONS HERE

A wonderful sanctuary in California – PAWS – offered to take all three of our elephants (Petal since died) over two years ago at no charge. The zoo instead is waiting for a breeding facility to be built – estimated costs of keeping the elephants in conditions the zoo itself has admitted are inadequate- close to a million dollars.

Many, many concerned citizens have also written or called Zoo officials about their concerns about the elephants. In response, the Zoo has misled the public by claiming that the elephants are going to a sanctuary – it is calling the breeding facility outside Pittsburgh a “sanctuary,” even though a sanctuary is a permanent home for animals where they can live out their lives in peace. In reality, what the zoo is planning to do with the elephants couldn't be further from that.

I visited the breeding facility a while back to see for myself, firsthand, what it would be like. There are three main reasons the current plans for the elephants don't make sense. (1) The method of management used there is abusive to elephants (2) the plans to breed are risky, and (3) waste of money.

(1) The elephants still be subjected to circus-style training based on dominance – and that means the use of bullhooks, **(SHOW PICTURE)** which I wanted to bring with me today but I couldn't get security clearance because it is classified as a weapon. Using bullhooks has been phased out long ago by most zoos who now use positive reinforcement training methods with their elephants.

(2) Attempting to breed these two elephants at all at their age is a high-risk gamble on the zoo's part. Mike Keele, the director of the Oregon Zoo and the person in charge of the Zoo association's species survival plan for elephants – an expert on elephants in captivity – has said that if an elephant isn't bred by the time she is 25, the odds are she won't get pregnant at all. Kallie and Bette are both 27. In the remote chance that Kallie or Bette does get pregnant, they or their baby will likely suffer from life-threatening conditions that have killed over 70 percent of the elephants in U.S. zoos who were bred for the first time over the age of 24.

(3) Big waste of money. The Philadelphia Zoo plans to maintain ownership of Kallie and Bette and has talked about some day returning them to Philly, even though the entire 42 acre zoo isn't big enough for elephants – the world's largest land mammals who need to walk miles every day. Zoo sometimes claim that captive breeding is important for conservation purposes. But experts in the native range countries disagree. Dame Daphne Shelbrick, whose conservation work in Kenya has been featured three times on the show 60 minutes, referring to the Philadelphia Zoo's plans to breed Kallie and Bette, said "It is my opinion that trying to breed elephants in captivity serves no conservation purpose whatsoever and claiming that it does merely confuses the public."

Second failure on the zoo's part to be accountable is the Zoo's refusal to provide information upon request by the public.

Just one example – and I could give many more - for over four years local concerned citizens have repeatedly asked for medical records for the elephants. Most public zoos are required to provide this information under the applicable open records acts, yet the Philadelphia Zoo has repeatedly refused to disclose this information. Many citizens became even more concerned about the health of Kallie and Bette after Petal died last summer. Zoo officials had repeatedly claimed that Petal did not have arthritis, when some of us saw her showing signs of it. The Zoo provided selected details of the necropsy report, at which point it was revealed that Petal suffered from arthritis so severe in her hips, elbows and knees that she couldn't arise after collapsing her barn that night, which contributed to her death. We think the public has the right to see medical records for these animals housed on city-owned property.

Given the questions that have been raised about the zoo's care for its elephants, we have concerns about the care given to the other animals as well.

In light of these concerns, we're asking CITY COUNCIL TO TAKE ACTION.

- Freeze City funding to the Zoo until it is responsive to public concerns and inquiries.
- Require the Zoo to release medical records for animals kept on the city-owned property.
- Require the Zoo to abandon its current plans to send the two surviving elephants to a breeding facility; require the elephants be sent to the California sanctuary which has generously offered to take them at no charge to the City or Zoo.
- Hold public hearings to address local residents' concerns regarding Zoo operations and animal welfare issues.