



March 27, 2019

Dane County Executive Joe Parisi
City County Building
210 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
Madison, WI 53703

Dane County Board of Supervisors
City County Building
210 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
Madison, WI 53703

Dear County Executive Parisi and County Board Supervisors:

The County Executive's Office and Zoo leadership have made the decision to take over all on-grounds operations of the Henry Vilas Zoological Society (HVZS). And, to retain a consultant to look at best practices for fundraising and issue an RFP for a fundraising partner. Last night, the County's Public Works & Transportation Committee voted to pass Resolutions #607 and #629, the first of three necessary votes to move this strategy forward.

At last night's meeting, The Henry Vilas Zoological Society (HVZS) asked for a 30-day delay and for the County Board to request the County Executive's Office to enter into a mediation to bring the two sides together and keep the HVZS the exclusive fundraising partner of the Henry Vilas Zoo (Zoo). We want to thank County Supervisors Kiefer, Schauer and Levin and many others who were willing to listen to the arguments from both sides, question the facts and support the position of the HVZS.

Unfortunately, despite our best efforts, the result of the vote last night means that HVZS will need to proceed with shutting down its operations, laying off its employees, cancelling fundraising events and ceasing the operations we oversee at the Zoo. This is disappointing and it did not need to happen.

Although we will be leaving the grounds, we feel it is important to respond to some of what was discussed last night and through the course of this debate as it will be important to your decision-making process going forward.

- On Monday, we received a copy of the memo from Chuck Hicklin to the County Board dated March 19, 2019 titled "Issues Surrounding the Henry Vilas Zoological Society Negotiations and AZA Accreditation." The concerns referenced in this memo were discussed with the County, clarifications provided to both parties by the AZA, and the issues were addressed in the contract draft dated February 8, 2019. To point back to language that was abandoned from previous contract drafts is pointless. The fact is, if there were specific issues to be addressed, we should have discussed those issues. But, the County Executive's Office would not participate in any dialog related to the contract after our February 8th response.
- It has been stated that the HVZS simply would not concede positions that jeopardized AZA accreditation. This is patently false. During the majority of the 10+ months of negotiations with the



County, we were discussing the increased payment we would make to the County under the new contract. There were not an intense series of meetings as there was no pressure of time. In fact, in many cases weeks would pass between correspondence. In August, the County asked to suspend negotiations due to the flooding, which of course we were amenable to doing. The next conversations picked up in October, after we became aware of the AZA Accreditation issue. The first draft of an agreement was presented to the County in December. The county provided a second draft agreement in late January/early February to which we responded back on February 8th. During this time, our concerns were centered on how the HVZS would remain an effective support organization. In the February 8th draft, we specifically acknowledged that the Zoo Director had the ultimate authority over the Zoo operations, which should have resolved the County's concerns about our operations. We do admit, and stand by, our position that we did not think that "ultimate authority" means every decision we made would need to be approved by the Zoo Director. This is not a requirement of the AZA. It is not how other AZA facilities are run throughout the country. And, it is not the relationship you will have with your third-party vendors, like Centerplate, going forward. Our position, and our requests were reasonable and standard for any operating partner.

- It has been stated that the role of the HVZS would have jeopardized accreditation. We have attached the pages of the AZA Report that speak to the role of the Society. As you can see, the AZA is clearly supportive of the HVZS's role in running on-grounds operations and is complimentary of our success as an organization, the existence of the endowment and the expertise our staff lends to the success of the Zoo. HVZS has nothing to do with the issues raised by the AZA. We strongly encourage you to get the full report(s) from the County. We also learned last night there was a second report issued after the September hearing, which we will request a copy of and suggest you do the same.
- The decisions of the County Executive's Office will have unknown financial impacts over the long term for the County. For the good of the Zoo, we strongly encourage the County board to discuss further the following:
 - The positions listed in resolution #607 will only cover a portion of the employees that will be needed to take over HVZS operations if the County expects to maintain the quality of the Zoo experience as we have done under our long-standing partnership. It is not our place to say how many more positions may be needed, but we suggest further study of the positions and services HVZS provides be discussed as they were all integral to achieving the success we've had over the past five plus years since the Artic Passage opened;
 - The HVZS currently pays for three of the County's staff positions as part of our annual payment. While these positions are budgeted as an expense in the County budget, there is no longer an off-setting annual revenue source for these positions. We encourage the County Board to ask how these positions will be covered. The County may expect to use the operating reserve, but even if this is the case, that money will not last over the long-term;
 - Resolution #627 moves concession operations from the HVZS, a non-profit organization, to Centerplate a for-profit operator. This will cost the County more money for the same service;
 - The success of the HVZS as a fundraising partner will not be easily duplicated or replaced. This is likely to create gaps in fundraising and place increased demands on funding which will now be the



responsibility of the County. There is no way to quantify this exactly, but we can say with certainty that it will take time for any partner, even the HVZS, to reconstitute itself in the donor community as there will likely be a several month period where no fundraising is occurring while the study is completed, RFP responses gained, contracts signed and organizations put in place. Presumably, this will all occur this Spring/Summer, so the prime fundraising months of 2019 will be lost and we may see impacts into 2020 and beyond.

- The AZA Standards are significantly focused on the financial stability of the organization. By not retaining the HVZS as a fundraising partner, the County risks destabilizing its financial position and may jeopardize its AZA Accreditation now and in the future.
- The County Executive's office has indicated that they will use the Operating Reserve and/or Endowment to pay for positions that were otherwise supported through the Contract proposed by HVZS. Requesting to utilize these funds, in lieu of securing the long-term financial stability of the Zoo, is not what is best for the Zoo or for Dane County.

We are asking you to consider the above points because we care about the future of the Zoo and want to make sure whatever plan is put in place, it is the best possible plan for the animals and our community. We firmly believe we would have been stronger together, but don't think the opportunity is the same for the future as our organization will be a shell of what it is today.

HVZS thanks those members of the County Staff who supported our efforts to maintain accreditation and the standards of our Zoo. And, we are hopeful that the County will continue its strong commitment to maintaining the quality of the operations that we've been able to achieve through our partnership.

And, while HVZS will look much different going forward, our board will remain in place to jointly oversee the financial management of the trust. We remain committed to the animals, conservation, research, education and other efforts that save species and our planet. Going forward, we will consider our options and capacity to continue as a fundraising organization. And, throughout, we will continue to maintain our commitment to do what is best for the Zoo and the Dane County community as a whole.

Thank you.

Respectfully,

Henry Vilas Zoological Society Executive Committee