

Los Angeles City Council
Los Angeles City Hall
200 N Spring Street
Los Angeles, Ca 90012

Dec 1, 2008

Cc: Honorable Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa

I am writing to you in support of Council member Tony Cardenas, who has presented a motion that would close the LA Zoo's elephant exhibit, and send its remaining elephant, a male named Billy to an elephant sanctuary.

My name is John Freeze, and I am retired Animal Husbandry Supervisor from the North Carolina Zoological Park, where I supervised the elephant section (1980-2005). In September 2005 I testified at the elephant hearing at the LA Zoo, supporting at that time a motion to oppose the expansion of the elephant exhibit and to send the current elephants to a sanctuary.

Having worked at another zoo that went through a recent elephant exhibit expansion, I think I can help give you some insight to the challenges and complexity of your own exhibit expansion, so that you might consider not proceeding with this project. I agree with Tony Cardenas that one of the reasons for closing the exhibit is that it is too cost prohibitive to build a 42 million dollar elephant exhibit.

In 1980 the NC Zoo opened a 3½-acre natural habitat African elephant exhibit, a premier exhibit that was ahead of its time. In 2008 the elephant exhibit was expanded, almost doubling the exhibit to 7 acres, along with building a new barn to house up to 10 elephants. In the last elephant expansion project design, I had concerns and questioned the rationale of doubling the size of the exhibit, while dramatically increasing the population of housing 10 elephants. Although increasing an elephant exhibit of any size does help, the number of projected elephants in this exhibit could soon occupy the new, additional space, thereby neutralizing any gains of increasing the size of the exhibit. Wanting to build a much larger acreage exhibit, but with a footprint too large for the existing site, the zoo settled for a much smaller, and less expensive exhibit. Compared to the exhibit that was built twenty-eight years ago, I believe the new expanded exhibit is already obsolete, wasting taxpayer's money. In presenting this example, I hope you might find some similarities that you would find helpful before you consider any elephant expansion project.

Elephants are also one of the most expensive zoo animals to house and maintain. A large number of elephants will require substantial expenditures for food that can cost hundreds of dollars a day, specialized and substantial medical care, and a larger, well-trained keeper staff. Elephants can be destructive in close confinement, where continuous, expensive repairs to barn stall enclosures and extensive exhibit wear can be expected.

After a long zoo career helping to manage elephants in a very progressive zoo, it became clear over the years that elephants cannot be managed successfully in cramped barns

stalls and in tiny exhibits that would be more appropriate in size for a domestic horse than for a large mammal, like an elephant.

No matter how zoos try to justify an elephant's confinement with conservation or educational messages, I concur with Tony Cardenas that there is an even more important humane issue that should be carefully considered. As with the NC Zoo, I believe the LA Zoo has the best intentions in wanting to provide better care for its elephants. Because of zoo budget restraints and a well-documented history of elephants not doing well physically or psychologically in captivity, zoos are still falling further behind in elephant exhibit design, and have not accurately assessed past, as well as future housing needs. Zoos cannot keep pace with the changing and overwhelming evidence, that elephants require far better husbandry care than what had been previously thought, or in time, a zoo can realistically deliver. This is where elephant sanctuaries, which are now in existence, have the advantage; elephants can immediately roam hundreds of acres and establish much needed social bonds. The best alternative that is both humane and cost effective is to send zoo elephants, such as Billy, to a large acreage sanctuary.

Thank you for taking the time to read my letter and for considering my recommendations. Whatever you decide to do, sometimes as humans it is difficult to step back and envision what an elephant would want, rather than what we would want.

Best regards,

John Freeze