



July 26, 2021

Honorable City Council
c/o City Clerk, Room 395, City Hall
Los Angeles, CA 90012

“Creating
dynamic
experiences
to connect
people and
animals”

**LOS ANGELES ZOO VISION PLAN – CERTIFICATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL
IMPACT REPORT (EIR) (STATE CLEARINGHOUSE NO. 2019011053) AND
PROJECT APPROVAL**

Los Angeles Zoo
5333 Zoo Drive
Los Angeles
California 90027
323/644-4200
Fax 323/662-9786
<http://www.lazoo.org>

In accordance with the *California Environmental Quality Act* (CEQA), the Zoo Department, in cooperation with the Bureau of Engineering (BOE), recommends that the City Council review, consider, and certify the Final Los Angeles Zoo Vision Plan Environmental Impact Report (EIR) and approve the Los Angeles Zoo Vision Plan (proposed Project) as described in the Final EIR.

Eric Garcetti
Mayor

RECOMMENDATIONS

Nithya Raman
Council Member
4th District

The General Manager of the Zoo Department respectfully requests that the City Council:

Zoo Commissioners

Karen B. Winnick
President

1. Certify that the EIR (Attachment No. 1) was completed in compliance with CEQA; that the EIR was presented to the City Council, as the decision-making body of the City of Los Angeles (City), and that the City Council reviewed and considered the information contained in the EIR; and that the EIR reflects and expresses the City’s independent judgment and analysis;
2. Adopt the Findings and Statement of Overriding Considerations (Attachment No. 2);
3. Adopt the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (Attachment No. 3);
4. Specify that the documents constituting the record of proceedings in this matter are in the files of the Zoo Department located at 5333 Zoo Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90027; and
5. Approve the proposed Project as described in the Final EIR.

Bernardo Silva
Vice President

Margot Armbruster

Christopher Hopkins

Daryl Smith

Richard Lichtenstein
ex officio member

BACKGROUND

Denise M. Verret
Chief Executive Officer
& Zoo Director

The City of Los Angeles has had a zoo in continuous operation since 1885. Although the venues, ownership, and exhibits have changed significantly over the past 136 years, the opportunity for people to have personal encounters with exotic animals and experience the wonder of nature in the midst of the urban landscape has been a constant in the story of Los Angeles. As zoos across the country have evolved from local tourist attractions to global wildlife conservation organizations, the Los Angeles Zoo has kept pace, and often set the pace, with plans to do even more.



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Alliance of Museums

Member of the California Association
of Zoos and Aquariums

In 1992, the Zoo developed its first Master Plan, entitled *Los Angeles Zoo 2002: A Master Plan*. In 1998, the Zoo developed the *Los Angeles Zoo 2002 Master Plan Update*. These Master Plan documents provided the road map for the Zoo's capital improvement plan with the investment of more than \$172 million of new construction projects and infrastructure improvements. These improvements were largely the first undertaken since the Zoo opened its doors to the public in its current location in 1966. Completion of the Master Plan represented the Zoo's commitment to deliver on its promises to the community that approved the various bond measures and to the philanthropic community that made generous donations in support of this capital improvement program. The capital investment was made possible with funding provided through voter indebtedness (Propositions A-1, A-2, K, and CC), City monies, and funds raised by the Greater Los Angeles Zoo Association (GLAZA).

Our past successes include new immersive habitats (*Campo Gorilla Reserve*, *Elephants of Asia*, and *Rainforest of the Americas*) and state-of-the-art animal care and support facilities implemented as part of the 1992 Master Plan. However, we must further transform the Zoo into the environmentally sustainable, world-class destination and wildlife conservation center that Los Angeles deserves, and that wildlife everywhere needs. Animal welfare is at the foundation of the Vision Plan and is the highest of the Zoo's priorities. The Vision Plan was developed with the following six guiding principles by which the Zoo seeks to innovate and transform the physical campus:

- Achieve the highest level of animal welfare;
- Advance conservation efforts locally and globally;
- Create meaningful, safe, and fun experiences for our visitors and our community;
- Enhance our facility, operations, and outreach as a world-class destination;
- Demonstrate environmental sustainability and best practices; and
- Embody operational excellence at every level

The following information provides the project description and the EIR process undertaken by BOE on behalf of the Zoo's Vision Plan project.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The proposed Project will serve as the blueprint and guide the physical transformation and modernization of facilities and operations of the Los Angeles Zoo over the next 20 years. The Vision Plan's proposed infrastructure and animal facility improvements prioritize animal welfare, conservation, sustainability, operational excellence and being a community resource. The Vision Plan addresses outdated facilities at the Zoo, including the quality and extent of animal habitat within exhibits such as the current lion exhibit area. The Vision Plan also addresses the currently constrained visitor circulation system and missing linkages between animal facilities, and a limited range of visitor-serving facilities. The Vision Plan will guide comprehensive animal facility improvements and capital projects to upgrade Zoo facilities and circulation to ultimately create a transformational zoo for the City, including expansion of the current elephant area by approximately 200 percent.

Improved and expanded facilities would allow for annual visitation to grow from approximately 1.8 million to 3.0 million guests over a 20 year timeframe. Improvements would be made through seven sequential phases of development. Project implementation would involve demolition of existing buildings, installation of new facilities, and construction of new pathways and circulation infrastructure.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

Scoping

A Notice of Preparation/Initial Study (NOP/IS) was released for the proposed Project on January 24, 2019 and circulated for 45 days for public and agency comments. Public scoping meetings were held at the Los Angeles Zoo's Witherbee Auditorium on Thursday, February 7, 2019, from 6:00pm-8:00pm and Saturday, February 9, 2019, from 11:00am-1:00pm to solicit input on the proposed Project. Sixty comment letters were received from public agencies, organizations, and individuals. These comments are summarized in the Draft EIR and provided in Appendix C. In addition, the City also engaged in expanded stakeholder consultation and outreach by conducting 13 stakeholder interviews with nearby local jurisdictions, resident organizations, non-profits, and schools. Through the scoping process, the City learned of key concerns related to animal welfare, transportation and traffic, land use and planning, preserving the urban forest, construction emissions, and habitat and biological resource impacts, and factored these concerns into the project design and environmental analysis.

Draft EIR

The Draft EIR was released on December 17, 2020 and was circulated for 60 days for public and agency review and comment. A Notice of Availability (NOA) and Notice of Completion (NOC) for the Draft EIR was mailed to interested parties and posted with the County of Los Angeles Clerk's Office and the Governor's Office of Planning and Research, State Clearinghouse on December 17, 2020. A notice regarding the public review period and time was published in the *Los Angeles Times*. The Draft EIR was also posted on the BOE website for review.

Due to the ongoing public health crisis associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, a virtual public meeting was held on January 13, 2021 during the Draft EIR public review period to solicit comments from interested parties on the content of the Draft EIR. A total of 32 comments were received on the Draft EIR through letters, emails or at the virtual public meeting. Responses to comments are documented in the Final EIR (Attachment No. 1).

Final EIR and Findings

The Final EIR states that the proposed Project would result in less than significant impacts after mitigation is implemented for Aesthetics and Visual Resources, Air Quality, Biological Resources, Cultural Resources, Urban Forestry Resources, Geology and Soils, Hazards and Hazardous Materials, Hydrology and Water Quality, Land Use and Planning, Noise and Vibration, Recreation, and Transportation. The EIR identifies feasible mitigation measures that would reduce these impacts to less than significant.

The Final EIR also finds that even with the implementation of all feasible mitigation measures, the proposed Project would still result in unavoidable significant impacts to Transportation (vehicle miles traveled (VMT) threshold of net zero for employees and Zoo visitors is not possible to meet) and Visual Resources (related to Zoo Drive Gateway intersection improvements, views and parking structure). As such, the proposed Project requires that a Statement of Overriding Considerations (Attachment No. 2) be adopted by the City Council to approve the proposed Project.

The Findings are based on information contained in the Draft EIR and the Final EIR for the proposed Project, as well as information contained within the administrative record. The administrative record includes, but is not limited to, the public hearing records, public notices, written comments on the proposed Project and responses to those comments, proposed decisions and the findings on the proposed Project, and other documents relating to the agency decision on the proposed Project.

PROJECT ALTERNATIVES

In accordance with the requirements of CEQA, the EIR described a range of reasonable alternatives to the proposed Project that could feasibly attain most of the objectives of the proposed Project but would avoid or substantially lessen any significant environmental impacts. The No Project Alternative, Reduced Project Alternative (Alternative 1), and Multi-modal Transportation Alternative (Alternative 2) were analyzed in detail in the Draft EIR, while four additional alternatives were considered but rejected as infeasible.

No Project Alternative

Under the No Project Alternative, the Vision Plan would not be adopted, comprehensive Zoo-wide expansion and redevelopment would not occur, and the Zoo would continue to operate as is, with maintenance, repair, and improvement of facilities occurring as needed. Improvements to Zoo Drive, the intersection of Zoo Drive/Western Heritage Way, realignment of Crystal Springs Drive, and the Zoo's parking lot would not occur. Similarly, resident animals would continue to live in some outdated animal spaces. The No Project Alternative does not mean “no future growth or land uses,” but rather that targeted Zoo improvements or expansion would occur under the existing 1998 Zoo Master Plan. The No Project Alternative would not involve any major improvements or large-scale expansions, as the 1998 Master Plan is nearly built out.

Reduced Project Alternative – Alternative 1

Alternative 1 would retain approximately 21 acres of undeveloped area currently within the Zoo property in its current setting. In doing so, this alternative would preserve a combination of native and non-native vegetation communities supporting a limited range of sensitive species and protected trees, as well as avoid visual and geologic changes to these areas. As a result, this alternative would reduce potentially significant impacts to biological and urban forestry resources, as well as aesthetics, air quality and GHG emissions, energy, noise, transportation, and utilities. With mitigations, Alternative 1 would reduce one significant and unavoidable impact (Impact VIS-2) related to aesthetic impacts to the visual character of the Zoo in context of the Zoo Drive gateway to Griffith Park. However, Alternative 1 would still generate VMTs that exceed the City's Transportation Assessment Guidelines (TAG) threshold of net-zero VMT for regional attractions like the Zoo and impacts related to transportation would remain significant and unavoidable. Alternative 1 would not meet or only partially meet several Project objectives.

Multi-modal Transportation Alternative – Alternative 2

The Multi-modal Transportation Alternative would incorporate the mitigation measures identified for the proposed Project, including the Zoo Transportation Demand Management (TDM) Program (MM T-2), with additional mitigation measures employed as necessary that would substantially expand multi-modal transportation opportunities (transit, bicycles, walking, ridesharing, etc.) to achieve a goal of reducing both employee and visitor VMT by 15 percent by 2040. As compared with the proposed Project, this alternative would reduce environmental impacts identified in the EIR associated with VMT. However, as the City's VMT threshold is net-zero, or no net increase in VMT, this alternative would not result in zero new VMT and transportation impacts would remain significant and unavoidable.

This alternative would also reduce potentially significant impacts to aesthetics, air quality and Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions, energy land use and planning, and transportation. This alternative would implement all improvements included as part of the proposed project except that the size, bulk and scale of the onsite parking structure would be reduced because of the decrease in parking demand resulting from the reduction of VMT by 15 percent. All proposed Zoo improvements would be implemented in the same time frame as the proposed Project.

Alternatives Considered but Rejected as Infeasible

As discussed in detail in Chapter 4 of the Draft EIR, Section 15126.6(c) of the State CEQA Guidelines requires EIRs to identify any alternatives that were considered by the lead agency but were rejected as infeasible during the scoping process and briefly explain the reasons underlying the lead agency's determination. The following five alternatives were considered but rejected as infeasible in the Draft EIR:

- Alternative Use (Reuse/Conservation Center) – Zoo would be redeveloped to function more as a conservation/research facility and would no longer be open to the public;
- Relocated Zoo – Zoo would be moved to an alternative site within the City, preferably within a Transit Priority Area. The current Zoo property would be redeveloped as a public park or as a restoration/nature demonstration site;
- Golf Course Expansion – The California and Africa planning areas would be developed by vacating portions or all of the Wilson & Harding Golf Course and relocating existing Zoo back-of-house and administration facilities to support expansion of visitor-serving and habitat areas onto the golf course property; and
- Adjusted Phasing Alternative – Some construction phases would be deferred and some construction phasing would be accelerated, such as construction of the parking garage in Phase 3 versus Phase 7.

Environmentally Superior Alternative

The No Project Alternative would result in the fewest impacts on the existing environment. Pursuant to CEQA regulations (see CEQA Guidelines Section 15126.6(e)(2)), if the No Project Alternative is the environmentally superior alternative, then the EIR must also identify an environmentally superior alternative from among the build (or “action”) alternatives. Based on the analysis in the Draft EIR, Alternative 1, the Reduced Project Alternative, is identified as the Environmentally Superior Alternative. Alternative 1 was found to generate the least adverse impacts compared to the Project and Alternative 2, the Multi-Modal Transportation Alternative. For example, avoidance of development within the hillsides of the California and Africa planning areas would greatly eliminate impacts to habitats onsite, including laurel sumac shrubland, coast live oak woodlands, eucalyptus/mixed woodlands, and California sage coastal scrub habitats. Alternative 1 would also minimize impacts to Nevin's barberry in the California planning area and Southern California Black Walnut in the Africa planning area. Reduction or elimination of the proposed parking structure would also reduce visual impacts to the public from roadways and areas fronting the Zoo in Griffith Park. However, Alternative 1 would continue to result in significant and unavoidable impacts to transportation, similar to the Project and Alternative 2. Alternative 1 would also fully meet only a few of the Project objectives and a majority of the Project objectives would only be partially met by Alternative 1. For example, the Zoo's ability to increase and modernize Zoo exhibit spaces, develop conservation facilities and programs, promote learning and education, provide an immersive visitor experience, and provide visitor-serving amenities would all be hindered by the reduced development footprint under Alternative 1. Elimination of the California planning area would include elimination of the California Visitor Center and associated food service facilities, meeting rooms, visitor shops and restrooms. Therefore, while Alternative 1 would be the Environmentally Superior Alternative, it would not achieve the objectives for the Project to the same extent as the Project and Alternative 2.

PROJECT PHASING, COST AND FINANCING

The proposed Project includes near-term and long-term improvements through seven sequential phases of development over the course of 20 years. Phases 1-3 are projected to be completed over a 5 – 10 year timeframe and include the Zoo Entry, California, Asia and Africa areas. Phases 4-7 are projected to be completed after Phases 1-3 over a 10 year timeframe. A detailed table of the phases and a conceptual map are contained in Attachments No. 4 and 5. The near-term Phases 1-3 are estimated to cost approximately \$650 million in 2022 dollars including design, construction, project management and contingencies. The Zoo will endeavor to finance Phase 1, Entry and California area of the Plan which is estimated to cost \$266 million utilizing fundraising support through a capital campaign led by GLAZA, the Zoo's non-profit partner, along with city, state and/or federal funds that may be eligible and available to support the implementation of the Plan.

CONCLUSION

The Vision Plan will guide future development and modernization of the Zoo for the next 20 years and includes comprehensive redesign and redevelopment to replace outdated buildings and infrastructure and improve animal welfare and the visitor experience. The EIR was completed over a more than two-year period and included extensive engagement and public feedback as part of the process. The completion of this Project is a significant milestone in the Zoo's effort to transform the Zoo. Finally, the Board of Zoo Commissioners was presented the final EIR at its meeting of June 15, 2021 and voted to provide a letter of support (Attachment No. 6) for City Council approval and certification of the Los Angeles Zoo Vision Plan Final EIR.

FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

The approval and certification of the Los Angeles Zoo Vision Plan EIR does not have a direct fiscal impact as there is no obligation of funding. However, it does enable fundraising efforts to be initiated while supplemental funding alternatives are pursued. Implementation of early phases will facilitate increased attendance and revenue ensuring a financially sustaining operating model for the Zoo.

Respectfully Submitted,



DENISE M. VERRET
General Manager, Zoo Department

DMV/dmt

Attachments

cc: Mary Hodge, Office of the Mayor
Matt Szabo, Office of the City Administrative Officer
Gary Lee Moore, Bureau of Engineering
Steve Houchin, Office of the City Attorney