



To: Mary Waters
Council Member at Large
City of Detroit

From: Dr. Hayley Murphy *Hayley W. Murphy, DVM*
Executive Director and CEO
Detroit Zoological Society

Date: March 22, 2023

RE: Detroit Zoological Society Budget Hearing

Please see the following response to your letter dated March 20, 2023, regarding the Detroit Zoological Society's budget. Feel free to contact me if you need further information.

1. *Please briefly explain, how the DZS has been affected by the COVID 19 pandemic, specifically, regarding loss in revenue and or workforce modifications.*

When the COVID-19 pandemic started in early 2020, the DZS anticipated significant future revenue losses, which led to drastic changes to its operations and operating structure. We laid-off almost all staff in the areas impacted by our 12-week closure – guest relations, rides & attractions, membership, and events. We also made deep reductions to the administrative team, down to only those essential to keep the business operational at a base level. Animal care staff and security staff were not reduced, as there was still an animal population to care for and City-owned assets to maintain and secure. Overall, employee headcount was reduced by almost 50%, with the remaining staff furloughed between 10% and 30%. These decisions allowed us to survive the worst of the pandemic. Revenue decreased from \$44 million in 2019 down to \$28 million in 2020, and expenses decreased accordingly. As we continued with limited operation in 2021 and returned to “normal” operation in 2022, though, we are found that operating a 125-acre campus with a fraction of the staff was extremely challenging. This led to an increase in staffing across the organization, back to around 95% of our pre-pandemic level.

2. *During this period of COVID 19, has your operations been hampered, if so, how? Has there been any new instituted changes in procedure or policy that should be remaining for use in the future?*

Please see question 1 above for discussion about how operations were hampered by the pandemic.

One positive change in procedure that has been retained is the use of “timed tickets”. In addition to selecting tickets for admission on a specific day, we also ask guests to select a particular time slot, in 30 minute increments. The goal of this change was to help us space out when guests arrive, to ensure proper social distancing. As we return to normal attendance levels in the coming months and years, we see this as a way to safely maximize attendance. Because of timed ticketing, most guests are now buying online and in advance, which helps us lock in revenue and also helps plan for each day. We anticipate higher guest satisfaction levels due to less crowding and easier parking.

The pandemic also caused us to move our educational programming to the internet, creating unique and engaging daily content for the entire community. *Virtual Ventures* is a free virtual educational program that includes exciting animal-related content, expert interviews, hands-on activities, and much more. We also created *Virtual Vitamin Z* lessons, with fun and engaging animal topics. By moving our educational content to the internet, and by creating new virtual learning programs, we were able to continue our impact on children and families in the City of Detroit and the tri-county area that we serve. This type of content will continue on into the future, even as operations return to normal.

3. *What is projected attendance for the DZS for the FY 2023*

For calendar 2023, we budgeted for 1,250,000 in attendance.

4. *Please provide an update on the Great Lakes Center for Nature and any new initiatives for the new nature center.*

The DZS and Huron-Clinton Metroparks announced a partnership in 2022, focused on providing educational programming to the entire community. Rather than invest in a brick-and-mortar facility up front, the teams are working closely to find out how they can best meet residents where they are, rather than asking them to come to us. This will likely include new and engaging educational programs for tri-county residents, with a focus on mobile outreach. A physical campus isn’t in the plan for the initial stages for this partnership.

5. *For the FY 2023, what are the new initiatives planned for the DZS, please provide a brief explanation.*

One new event for 2023 is *BrickLive*, which is a “Lego-like” exhibit of more than 70 super-sized animals that will be placed along our 5-acre “dino” trail! We recognize that our guests look for new and exciting things every year, so we’re planning to put new content in the trail space every year. This event will be open from Memorial Day to Labor Day and will cost \$5 to attend.

6. *Please provide an update on the Fresh Water Nature Center in Macomb County, and within the near future will the City of Detroit have its own Fresh Water Nature Center*

Please see question 4 above, which discusses our partnership with the Huron-Clinton Metroparks.

In the City of Detroit, our focus is on the Belle Isle Nature Center, which reopened in August 2023 after a \$2.5 million renovation. New features at the facility include an interactive exhibit where guests can immerse themselves in the world of pollinators, a kids play area where they will be transported into a “larger than life” world of familiar spaces to explore urban nature, and new animal habitats. These enhanced habitats all feature a backdrop of the Detroit city skyline and familiar scenes from around metro Detroit. Even after the completion of this project, the Belle Isle Nature Center will remain free-of-charge to visit.

CC: Councilmembers
Donnie Johnson, Associate Budget Director
Doug Ortiz, Budget Analyst
Malik Washington, Mayor’s Office
James George, Agency OCFO
Robert Schumaker, DZS Chief Financial Officer
Amanda Hanlin, DZS Chief of Staff