



# Independent Investigation at Henry Vilas Zoo Findings and Recommendations

Presentation to the Dane County Board of Supervisors  
Committee of the Whole  
November 17, 2022

Hon. V.L. Bailey-Rihn



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# Introduction

On June 2, 2022, the Dane County Board passed 2022 RES-O16 authorizing an independent investigation into the Henry Vilas Zoo. The Board was concerned about allegations of racism by zoo management, retaliation for union activity and whistleblowing, unequal discipline and mistreatment of animals.

After conducting extensive interviews, a separate anonymous and voluntary survey, and review of documents, this report summarizes my findings and recommendations.



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# Summary of Findings

# Findings

- RAPID GROWTH OF THE ZOO
- NO ACTIONABLE LEGAL ISSUES
- CONCERNS ABOUT FAVORITISM
- STEPS ARE BEING TAKEN TO ADDRESS CULTURE

# Growth of the Zoo and Covid-19

- The Henry Vilas Zoological Society (“the Society”) and the Zoo “divorced” in April 2019 after the Zoo and Dane County declined to renew their contract with the Society. As a result of the split and the AZA’s recommendations, the Zoo hired several additional zookeepers and had to take over all the staffing the Society had previously provided. **The staffing of the zoo approximately doubled between 2018 (21 positions) through 2020 (30 positions) and into 2022 (39.5 positions).**
- During this period, most of the management team turned over except for the Director. In addition, new management was added, including two zoo managers and another lead zookeeper. Employees that previously worked for the Society were hired by the Zoo and a new operations director was hired. This rapid growth caused both growing pains and concerns about the ability of the promoted individuals to handle their new responsibilities. **In addition, most of the growth occurred in the COVID-19 era, which created additional challenges not previously faced by any organization.**

# No Actionable Legal Issues

- After extensive interviews, review of documents, and a survey, allegations of illegal conduct were not substantiated.
- Mistakes were made as to animal care; however, these issues have been substantially corrected.
- Concerns exist as to aging facilities and indoor space for animals.

# Favoritism Concerns Exist

- Perceptions of favoritism in discipline exist
- Zoo is addressing this issue by implementing the 'just cause' method of discipline
- Continued discussion among staff regarding work assignments

# Steps Taken to Address Concerns

- My findings are similar to findings issued in May 2022 from the internal investigation conducted by staff of OEI and Employee Relations
- Internal investigation provided positive steps to address issues, and assistance with implementation is ongoing
- Zoo has a workplace plan with concrete steps to address the lack of civility and other workplace culture issues among employees at the Zoo

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# Recommendations

# Recommendations

1. Restructure the Zoo Organizational Chart
2. Gather Input by Zookeepers and Others on Key Decisions
3. Eliminate Claims of Favoritism with “Just Cause”
4. Dealing with Limited Resources
5. UW Veterinary Care and Reporting Animal Welfare
6. Standardize Processes
7. Security Concerns
8. Improve Communication About Maintenance
9. Zoo-Wide Training and Support
10. Opportunities for Advancement and Growth

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# Final Comments

# Final Comments

- I want to emphasize that the issues experienced by the Zoo over the last four-plus years have been challenging.
- Regardless, the staff has continued to function and provide excellent care to the animals entrusted to them. They have been placed under a microscope and portrayed negatively in the public eye, often without merit.
- Both management and employees have made mistakes, all organizations do, but continue to show up for work and represent the Zoo in a positive way.
- I am impressed by the knowledge, care, and professionalism of the individuals at the Zoo. Hopefully, these suggestions will aid the County and the Zoo in continuing to be a gem of the County and will allow individuals to focus on the path ahead.

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# Thank you

V.L. Bailey-Rihn

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