

1 **2022 RES-016**

2 **ESTABLISHING AN INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATION OF**  
3 **THE HENRY VILAS ZOO**  
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5 The Henry Vilas Zoo is one of Dane County’s most treasured assets and is one of the  
6 very few free zoos left in the United States. It is accredited by the Association of Zoos  
7 and Aquariums, which is the gold standard of accreditation for zoos, and which is  
8 achieved by less than 10 percent of wildlife exhibitors in the United States.

9 On April 17, 2022, the Wisconsin State Journal published an in-depth investigation of  
10 the zoo, alleging racism, retaliation against zoo employees for union activities, animal  
11 neglect, and other allegations.

12 On April 24, 2022, in an editorial titled “Zoo Needs Independent Investigation,” the  
13 Wisconsin State Journal editorial board called for an independent investigation of the  
14 zoo.

15 Under DCO 7.11(7), the county board and its standing committees “shall continually  
16 monitor the performance of departments and agencies in carrying out the policies of  
17 Dane County.”

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19 Wis. Stat. 59.51 grants the county board broad authority to “represent the county” and  
20 “have the management of the business and concerns of the county in all cases where  
21 no other provision is made.”

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23 The county board is aware that the Department of Administration has conducted an  
24 investigation of Henry Vilas Zoo operations and is working with zoo management to  
25 remedy the issues identified in that investigation. In no way does the county board  
26 question the hard work that has been, and continues to be, applied to that effort by  
27 county staff. However, the county board also finds that the concerns identified by the  
28 Wisconsin State Journal are severe enough that an independent, third-party  
29 investigation is warranted and necessary to restore public trust in the zoo, ensure that  
30 all zoo employees are treated fairly, and to ensure that animals are being humanely  
31 cared for.

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33 NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Dane County Board Chair shall select  
34 and appoint a retired Circuit Court Judge as a special investigator to lead an  
35 independent investigation of the zoo.

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37 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the scope of the independent investigation shall  
38 include all issues raised in the Wisconsin State Journal’s report, including but not limited  
39 to:

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41
  - 42 • allegations of racism by zoo management
  - 43 • allegations of retaliation for union activity
  - allegations of retaliation for whistleblowing

- 44       • allegations that employees have been unequally disciplined  
45       • allegations that animals at the zoo have been neglected or mistreated  
46       • allegations that zoo employees have left their jobs due to a hostile work  
47       environment  
48

49 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the independent investigation examine issues to  
50 determine whether policies, including those in Dane County Ordinance Chapter 18 and  
51 the Employee Benefits Handbook, are being carried out and provide recommendations  
52 to better implement policies.  
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54 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the special investigator shall issue a written report,  
55 including specific recommendations for reforms at the zoo, and shall appear at a  
56 meeting of the Dane County Public Works and Transportation Committee to discuss the  
57 investigative report and take questions from the committee.  
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59 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that \$50,000 shall be appropriated from the county  
60 board's program evaluation budget line for the independent investigation.  
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62 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the retired judge who is appointed to be the special  
63 investigator shall bill their time at the rate of \$200/hour, and the special investigator  
64 shall further be authorized to bill for clerical and other staff assistance and necessary  
65 expenses, not to exceed the \$50,000 total budget for this investigation.  
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67 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the special investigator shall have use of the county  
68 board's office suite, if needed, during the investigation to conduct meetings and  
69 interviews.  
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71 BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that the independent investigation and written report shall  
72 be completed by no later than October 1, 2022, and shall be presented to a meeting of  
73 the Committee of the Whole of the County Board as soon as possible thereafter.