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DANE COUNTY | BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

Vilas Zoo to get outside investigation: Dane County Board will hire retired judge to probe complaints

Lucas Robinson | Wisconsin State Journal

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Visitors to the Vilas Zoo watch a pair of harbor seals from an underwater viewing window. The zoo, one of the last free wildlife exhibitors in the country, has long been a popular fixture in Madison. But some zookeepers have alleged a pattern of racism, discrimination and animal neglect.

JOHN HART, STATE JOURNAL ARCHIVES

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The Dane County Board will hire a retired judge to investigate allegations against Vilas Zoo management of racism, animal neglect and retaliating against employees who speak out amid a growing reckoning on how the county should handle workplace environment complaints.

Board supervisors voted 25-7 Thursday night to spend \$50,000 on the independent probe with the hope that it will restore public trust in the zoo. In April, **the Wisconsin State Journal reported** that the zoo's only Black zookeepers quit in recent months over discrimination and zoo management decisions that lead to the death and injury of animals.

Sup. Tim Kiefer, 25th District, who authored the resolution commissioning the investigation, said he's backing the probe so he isn't taking young family members to a zoo that has problems caring for animals and employees

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"It's about the kids and the families who go to the zoo," Kiefer said. "It's about the animals that are in the zoo, and making sure that everyone, all species that are at the zoo, are treated fairly."

"I don't have any predetermined idea of where I think this investigation should lead or what the conclusion should be," Kiefer added. "I just want someone who's impartial and independent who's going to look at it and come back with a report."

Under the resolution, the judge will have the ability to investigate allegations of racism, retaliation against union activity, unequal discipline of employees, neglect of animal welfare and whether staff have left the zoo over its workplace environment. Supervisors have yet to choose the judge who will lead the probe. Kiefer said selection of the judge would be an informal process overseen by Board Chair Patrick Miles.

In April, the county's Office of Equity and Inclusion conducted an internal review of the workplace environment at the zoo. Investigators confirmed that the zoo had a toxic workplace environment that included racism and lack of transparency of how animal welfare concerns get addressed. But investigators placed the blame of creating an "Us versus Them" climate on unnamed zoo staff and the county's workers union.

Following revelations about the zoo, management there has started to work with the Office of Equity and Inclusion to implement a diversity and equity plan that will be continuously monitored and assessed after a year.

Other workplaces

But issues at the zoo are only one workplace environment concern that has surfaced publicly in recent weeks, prompting many supervisors to suggest that the county has systemic issues with how it treats its workforce.

Earlier this month, **Wisconsin Watch reported** that more than a dozen current and former employees at the Dane County Medical Examiner's Office faced bullying, transphobia and insults at the hands of office management.

Supervisors grappled with the question of whether a zoo-specific investigation would truly remedy what they said appears to be a county-wide problem.

Sup. Analiese Eicher, 3rd District, urged peers to send the resolution back to committee so supervisors "get exactly what we need." Her motion to refer the resolution back to committee failed on a 13-20 vote.

"I think we all want a good report and a report that gives us direction as to how to fix these things, how to make better policy," Eicher said.

But other supervisors argued that an investigation of the zoo be a start in addressing workplace environment problems.

"I think starting with the zoo could be a good first step to see and help shed some light and direction," said Sup. Elizabeth Doyle, 1st District.

Parisi's stance

Earlier this week, County Executive Joe Parisi came out in favor of commissioning an outside organization to conduct an assessment of the racial climate throughout the entire Dane County workforce. Parisi has publicly opposed the board's plan to hire an outside judge, likening it to the GOP-ordered probe of the 2020 election led by former Supreme Court Justice Michael Gableman.

County attorneys have disputed the board's authority to investigate the zoo, saying that a judge will not be able to investigate allegations against specific employees.

Specific allegations detailed in the State Journal's report included the zoo's deputy director, Joseph Darcangelo, calling an Asian restaurant "ching-chong" food and director Ronda Schwetz ordering a pre-disciplinary meeting for a union representative and zookeeper who asked other employees about the racist incident and reported it to Schwetz.

Since the county executive handles management of county staff and functions, the board's investigation cannot probe specific allegations made against employees, Carlos Pabellon, a county attorney, has said.

How they voted

Here is how the Dane County Board voted on an independent investigation of the Vilas Zoo.

Voting for: Andrae, Bare, Chawla, Collins, Doolan, Downing, Doyle, Engelberger, Glazer, Gray, Hynes, Huelsemann, Kiefer, Kigeya, Miles, Palm, Pellebon, Ritt, Schauer, Smith, Veldran, Wegleitner, Weigand, Wright and Xistris-Songpanya.

Against: Bollig, Castillo, Erickson, McCarville, Ratcliff, Ripp and Rose.

Abstaining: Eicher.

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