

Ten Years Later, Will Fresno County Voters Keep Zoo Tax?

By Diana Aguilera

After struggling to keep its accreditation back in 2004, the Fresno Chaffee Zoo got a boost from voters with a special sales tax. Now a decade later the zoo is again asking voters for their help on the November ballot. But as FM89's Diana Aguilera reports, some say Fresno's zoo is already being saved.

Nearly eleven years ago Angel Arrellano wrote a letter to her local newspaper.

"Dear Fresno Bee. My name is Angel and I am nine. I heard that the Chafee Zoo is having money problems."

Along with her letter, Angel sent something extra.

"I think that if everybody in Fresno gave a dollar to the Chafee Zoo it would help a lot," Angel says. "Here's my dollar."

Back then the zoo was in trouble. It was about to lose its accreditation and it needed money to make improvements. Angel's letter helped to do just that. Donations started rolling in, and in 2004 Fresno County voters approved Measure Z. The tenth of a cent sales tax passed by 73 percent, raising money to pay for the zoo's renovation, new exhibits and staffing.

Now 10 years later things have changed. Angel Arrellano is a 20-year-old college student at CSU Monterey Bay and Measure Z is up for renewal.

Last weekend, I meet up with her at the zoo for a special occasion. It was her first time seeing construction the new African Adventure Exhibit which is set to open next year.

This over \$50 million exhibit will feature lions, elephants, and cheetahs starting next October. It's the biggest project funded by Measure Z, which will raise an estimated \$100 million by the time it expires. It's also funded maintenance and operations as well as the new the Sea Lion Cove and Stingray Bay exhibits.



The changes have been popular, and attendance is up. Zoo officials say in 2009 around 400,000 people visited the zoo. Last year, the zoo brought in nearly 700,000 people.

"Fresno County has a very high poverty rate. These sales tax hit low income families the hardest," says Joan LeRoux with No on Measure Z campaign.

Scott Barton is Fresno Chaffee Zoo's director. He says if Measure Z is renewed, it would allow them to build even more new exhibits.

"African Adventure is being done with the existing Measure Z and the next Measure Z would then allow us to continue on those improvements."

Barton says it's time upgrade older parts of the zoo.

"The first project we would love to take on is a hippo exhibit. Even more than that, hippos and crocks and African otters all in kind of an African river experience but with underwater viewing so you can see hippos underwater."

Still, Barton says the zoo has made great progress and is in much better shape financially, than it was 10 years ago.

But that progress could also be a challenge in the effort to renew the sales tax.

Perhaps the best example is the Yes on Measure Z campaign's sign. You'll see the large grey cartoon elephant on lawns, on the back of cars, and at businesses across Fresno County. It looks almost exactly like the one first used for the original campaign 10 years ago. But there ARE a few differences. In 2004 the elephant looked sad, like it was on the verge of crying. And the slogan said "Save Our Zoo."

Now a decade later, the elephant is smiling, and the slogan sends a different message ... "Keep Our Zoo."

The changes haven't gone unnoticed by Measure Z's opponents. Joan Leroux is one of them.

"When it was first voted in it was a save the zoo measure, the zoo's been saved," Leroux says. "We don't know why they need it to keep it, there's no threat to take it away that I know of."

Leroux is the co-chair of the group No on Measure Z. She claims there's been a lack of transparency in the projects and big cost overruns. Her group says many residents can't afford the sales tax.

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So if the message now isn't save the zoo, but keep the zoo, what would happen if Leroux got her way? I asked Dennis Woods, the chairman of the Yes on Zoo Committee, and President of United Security Bank.



Diana: If this measure were to fail would Fresno County no longer have a zoo?

Woods: "What would clearly happen if you don't have enough money the admissions would spike, there won't be new attractions and we won't have the money to keep up maintenance of the zoo."

Wood says the renewal of Measure Z wouldn't just build new exhibits.

"The money is very specific two thirds have to go to expanding improving the zoo and a maximum of one third can go to operating the zoo."

Back at the African Adventure exhibit, as Angel and I survey the construction site, she says its projects like this that make the sales tax worth it.

“I think it’s a huge part of what we’re saying when we say vote yes on Measure Z. I mean we can tell the community we’re going to do this we’re going to do that with the money but when you actually see stuff happening, it’s kind of like proof, this is what we’re going to do with the money, we’re going to make more exhibits like this for you guys. “

Fresno County residents will decide the fate of Measure Z on November 4. The measure needs a two thirds vote to pass.