

Fresno Chaffee Zoo backers seek Measure Z victory

By Tim Sheehan



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Fresno County's voters will decide on Nov. 4 whether to keep assessing themselves an extra one-tenth of 1% sales tax to provide extra money for improvements and operations at the Fresno Chaffee Zoo for another decade.

In 2004, when the original Measure Z was approved by voters, it was a largely one-sided affair. Supporters raised about \$1.3 million, compared to only about \$10,000 by the formal No on Z committee. The measure passed by a margin of almost 3-to-1, receiving more than 171,000 yes votes to fewer than 62,000 no votes. Because it coincided with a presidential election, voter turnout was a healthy 71%.

This year, there is potential for a little more uncertainty in the outcome. Because the main event isn't a presidential election, voter turnout is likely to be significantly lower. The zoo, which has received more than \$102 million over the last 10 years from Measure Z, is on substantially better financial footing than the dire straits that were widely proclaimed in 2004. There's a 10-year track record for voters to evaluate.

And the fundraising margin, while still substantial, is not as overwhelming as it was a decade ago. With just a few weeks left before the election, the Yes on Measure Z committee has reported about \$700,000 in contributions. The financial support is coming from some of Fresno's heaviest hitters: \$200,000 each from former Pelco president/CEO

David McDonald and Gerald Lyles, senior VP of Lyles Diversified Inc., \$50,000 each from Granville Homes and Howe Electric; \$25,000 each from developer Tom Richards of the Penstar Group and from developer Ed Kashian's River Park Properties II; and lesser amounts ranging from \$100 up to \$20,000.

The only income reported by the No on Z 2014 committee, in the meantime, is about \$32,000 loaned to the campaign by the committee's chairwoman, occupational therapist Joan LeRoux.

The advantage in campaign money means you're seeing far more cute little gray elephants on yard signs urging you to cast a "yes" vote on Measure Z than cute little gray elephants on mailers and other material urging a "no" vote. For the 10-year extension to pass, Measure Z needs approval from two-thirds of voters who cast ballots. If it falls short, the added sales tax will sunset next year.

Fully two-thirds of the money generated by Measure Z is for capital improvements to the zoo's physical facility, including new exhibits, and up to one-third can be used for the day-to-day operational expenses of caring for animals and maintaining the buildings and exhibits.

Scott Barton, the zoo's director, said Measure Z has fueled two of the most visible improvements to the zoo: the 200,000-gallon Sea Lion Cove exhibit that opened in 2012, and the African Adventure exhibit now under construction and expected to open next year, that will mark the return to Fresno of large animals including elephants, lions, cheetahs and rhinoceroses.

But there has been less-sexy work as well: rebuilding sidewalks and pathways to make them more handicap accessible and compliant with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act; spruced-up landscaping; upgrades to existing animal exhibits including the reptile building; updating or replacing water, sewer and electrical infrastructure; and beginning the installation of fiber-optic cable throughout the zoo to allow for greater opportunities for sending programs to school classrooms around the county and the potential for live webcams allowing visitors to peek at the critters online. "All of this is bringing us into the 21st century," Barton said.

"We haven't raised our admission prices in 10 years," he added, "and that's only been possible because of the Measure Z support as well. ... We've been able to keep our prices flat and yet do award-winning exhibits."

He believes the zoo's attendance is proof of the measure's success: Last year, a record 691,000 people visited the zoo, a figure he said is about double what it was five years ago.

LeRoux, who is leading the modest No on Z charge, describes herself as a zoo supporter and zoo donor. But, she added, "I just don't support the tax. The key points just come down to good government, open government and full transparency."

Measure Z, she said, has served its purpose and is no longer needed to save the Chaffee Zoo. It enabled the zoo to make necessary improvements and provided money for expansions such as the Sea Lion Cove and the under-construction African Adventure exhibit, and brought the zoo to a point where, in a report to the Fresno County Board of Supervisors, zoo representatives said "we have a business plan to ensure financial sustainability beyond 2021 even if Measure Z sunsets."

"They say it, and I believe it," LeRoux added.

LeRoux has other concerns, including a promise made to voters 10 years ago that no Measure Z funds would go to government. "By law, every dime must be spent restoring the zoo," supporters argued in the 2004 ballot pamphlet.

But the state Board of Equalization charges the Fresno County Zoo Authority between 4% and 6% each quarter — an administrative fee for collecting the sales tax and distributing the money back to the authority that has added up to more than \$2.2 million just since 2011, according to data from the state. At that rate, the administrative charges have added up to more than \$5 million over Measure Z's life.

"The claim that funds don't go to government is not fair," LeRoux said. "This is money that's drained out of the Fresno County economy. It never comes back to us."

LeRoux also contends that the two flagship projects undertaken by the zoo with Measure Z funds — Sea Lion Cove and the African Adventure — cost far more than originally envisioned in the mid-2000s. The zoo's Sea Lion Cove cost about \$10.5 million, compared to original estimates of about \$5 million. African Adventure is projected to cost \$56 million by the time it opens next year, up from earlier forecasts of \$27.5 million in 2009.

Barton, the zoo director, and Dennis Woods, United Security Bank president/CEO and chairman of the Keep Our Zoo — Yes on Measure Z campaign, discounted LeRoux's assertions as a misinterpretation of information.

Barton said what LeRoux calls cost overruns on the sea lion and African exhibit projects are not. The early estimates were only estimates, not budgeted amounts, he said, and predated final exhibit plans approved by the Fresno Chaffee Zoo Corp. — the private, nonprofit agency that was established to run the zoo. The reason for increases, Barton said, is because the zoo corporation board ultimately decided to focus on "a few extraordinary exhibits instead of a dozen ordinary exhibits." That decision expanded the scope, and hence the cost, of the planned exhibits.

"When a group sits down and throws out options and ideas, you benchmark based on what other zoos have done," Barton said. "But until you sit down with a design team and the board decides that it wants something bigger and better, that's another thing."

Only when designs and plans were finalized by the zoo corporation was a budget prepared and submitted to the Fresno County Zoo Authority, a board with members appointed by the Fresno County Board of Supervisors with representation from the Fresno City Council. The Zoo Authority holds the Measure Z purse strings.

"On Sea Lion Cove, we budgeted \$10.5 million, we asked the Zoo Authority for \$10.5 million, and it came in on budget and under schedule," Barton said. A similar process was followed for the African Adventure, he added.

Among the plans if Measure Z passes, Barton said, is an expansion of the Africa exhibit beyond a savannah to include a river environment that would provide a home for hippopotami and crocodiles. Other improvements may include a new home for polar bears and penguins, and expansion of habitats for South American species such as jaguars.

Woods said that if Measure Z falls short of the two-thirds majority on Election Day, "it would be more than a step backward for the zoo; it would be putting it in high-speed reverse."

Woods, who was on the original Measure Z campaign committee in 2004, said the main reason for his involvement then and now is a desire to make sure the zoo is affordable for lower-income families. The zoo's admission fees are \$7.50 for adults, \$3.50 for kids 2 to 11 and for seniors over 62, and free for kids under 2.

"When it comes to affordable educational and family entertainment, we're pretty limited here," said Woods, who recalled a childhood growing up in a poor neighborhood near the zoo and spending plenty of days there when admission was free. "Where I get worked up is, if you take Measure Z away, it's going to cost more for people to go to the zoo, and it makes it less affordable for low-income families."

While the zoo has a sustainability plan to keep its doors open if Measure Z fails, Woods said "sustainable" would represent a significant letdown for the fifth-largest city in California.

"You'd have no new exhibits, no new improvements," he said. "Who says Fresno has to always settle for 'good enough?' "

He pointed to an Association of Zoos and Aquariums award that the zoo won for its Sea Lion Cove, competing with the likes of Sea World, the San Diego Zoo and the Smithsonian. The African exhibit, Woods added, is also expected to be a show-stopper for the zoo when it is finished.

Barton said the effects of a sunset for Measure Z would be immediate: The zoo would have to raise admission prices, and while work on the new African Adventure exhibit would be completed, "we would have to cease development and construction of new exhibits." Over the longer term, "we would be struggling to keep up with maintaining exhibits. The animals would be cared for, but we may have to cut back on some educational programs" because staff would likely be reduced.

"We're going to have to weigh all those things if we don't have support from Measure Z."

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Measure Z revenue

Since Measure Z, a one-tenth of 1% sales tax add-on, was originally approved by Fresno County voters in 2004, it has generated almost \$100 million in net revenue for expansion and improvements at the Fresno Chaffee Zoo. The Fresno County Zoo Authority has paid more than \$5 million in administrative costs to the state Board of Equalization since 2004.

Fiscal year	Revenue	Admin. cost
2014-15*	\$3,213,726	N/A
2013-14	\$9,102,217	\$776,530
2012-13	\$12,296,551	\$579,040
2011-12	\$11,071,468	\$549,790
2010-11	\$9,811,839	\$619,140
2009-10	\$9,315,775	\$593,860
2008-09	\$10,360,884	\$596,900
2007-08	\$11,151,879	\$604,100
2006-07	\$11,664,370	\$560,300
2005-06	\$10,962,752	\$334,000
2004-05**	\$701,853	N/A
10-year total	\$99,653,311	\$5,213,660

* July-September 2014 (first quarter of 2014-15 fiscal year)

** Collection of the tax began in April 2005 for the last three months of the 2004-05 fiscal year

Source: State Board of Equalization