

Fresno Chaffee Zoo board signs on to save Storyland and Playland

By Marc Benjamin



In a March 3 file photo, the gate to Rotary Storyland in Roeding Park remained closed.
CRAIG KOHLRUSS — THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

- *Zoo corporation approves relationship with struggling Storyland and Playland parks.*
- *Structure of Storyland and Playland management could change.*
- *Parks need \$850,000 in repairs, but attractions may not open until 2016.*

Fresno Chaffee Zoo Corporation board agreed Wednesday night to come to the rescue of Rotary Storyland and Playland.

Under the agreement, the zoo corporation will oversee a new board to run the parks, initiate a fundraising effort for Storyland and Playland, and use zoo employees on a donated or reimbursement basis to get the parks operating again by early next year. Storyland and Playland will also employ its own staff as required for operations, renovation or maintenance.

The dozen members of the existing Rotary Storyland and Playland board still must approve the agreement, which also will require all but one board member to resign. The one remaining member, who was not identified, will join the

new board, which will be led by Scott Miller, owner of Gazebo Gardens.

Other new board members include: Bruce Batti, president of Jeffrey Scott Agency; retired Fresno County Supervisor Susan Anderson; zoo corporation chairman John Valentino; and Fresno Chaffee Zoo director Scott Barton. Nine to 11 members will eventually comprise the board, Miller said.

The zoo corporation's unanimous vote was met with applause. For the past eight years, there have been talks on-and-off about the zoo overseeing Storyland and Playland. Those seemingly ended with Wednesday night's decision.

"We all know we have gone through some tough times, but we just want to thank all of you for your support," Ron Sidoli, a Storyland and Playland board member, told the zoo corporation board.

Storyland needs significant repairs to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. It also has issues with lifted sidewalks and requires a new irrigation system. Playland will need railroad track repairs, maintenance for other rides, cement work and general cleanup.

The zoo can't use Measure Z funds for any projects outside the zoo's property, but Barton said the zoo is willing to consider "cross-marketing" ideas and help with the structural makeup of the boards for Storyland and Playland.

The parks' attendance has dropped significantly in recent years after peaking at 152,000 in 2011. Efforts to keep prices low for visitors while attendance and concession sales have fallen led to the recent financial problems, officials said.

Valentino, the zoo corporation board's president, vowed to move swiftly to fix the parks.

"This new board will immediately launch and manage a community campaign to raise \$850,000 by Jan. 31, 2016," Valentino said. "The fundraising campaign will be structured to engage all community sectors and to attract matching funds for qualifying donations."

Once \$200,000 is reached, renovation and maintenance can begin. The first projects will be in Storyland, the train that runs between the two parks and getting the carousel open and operating by Jan. 10, 2016. Playland will be evaluated separately with the most appropriate improvements by Sept. 15, 2016, Valentino said.

Bringing the zoo into the process allows "donors, many of whom we've already talked to, to feel a lot more comfortable contributing with the zoo as a presence in the operation," Valentino said. "So, we like the idea of community involvement and we think that has begun."

Miller said he was impressed by the group forming to serve as the new board. Resources are already aligning to help in the renovations, he added.

"People in the community see Storyland and Playland and the zoo as being connected and the heft that your (zoo corporation) board carries will be a tremendous benefit to use going forward for the fundraising we need to get this thing rolling," Miller said.

Earlier this week, Valentino said the zoo and the two struggling parks have a great deal in common.

"The zoo is getting greater and greater attendance, so there is a bigger opportunity for any location right there next to the zoo," he said.

Contact Marc Benjamin: mbenjamin@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6166 or @beebebenjamin on Twitter.