



- [Home](#)
- [Eyewitness News](#)
- [Weather](#)
- [Traffic](#)
- [Entertainment](#)
- [Consumer](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Seen on ABC7](#)
- [Sports](#)



- [Community](#)
- [About](#)
- [Real Estate](#)

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- [National](#)
- [World](#)
- [Politics](#)
- [Business](#)
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- [Wireless](#)
- [See it! Shoot It! Send It!](#)
- [Tipline](#)
- [News Team](#)

- [7 Day Forecast](#)
- [LIVE MEGA DOPPLER 7000 HD](#)
 - [- Los Angeles-North](#)
 - [- Los Angeles-South](#)
 - [- Orange County](#)
 - [- Riverside County](#)
 - [- San Bernardino](#)
 - [- Ventura County](#)

- [Surf Report](#)
- [Weather Cams](#)

- [Ventura County](#)
- [Los Angeles - North & West](#)
- [Los Angeles - East](#)
- [Orange County](#)
- [Inland Empire](#)
- [San Diego County](#)

- [Hollywood Wrap](#)
- [Bizarre News](#)
- [Television Listings](#)
 - [- Daytime](#)
 - [- Primetime](#)
 - [- Weekend](#)
- [Movie Showtimes & Tickets](#)
- [Horoscopes](#)

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- [Earthquake Center](#)
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- [Cool Kids](#)

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Council Approves Expanded Elephant Habitat

City Council approves 13 million in municipal funds for the expanded elephant exhibit

Los Angeles, April 19, 2006 - A 3.7 acre, \$39 million elephant exhibit will be built at the Los Angeles Zoo under a plan the City Council approved today.

After a 90 minute discussion, the council voted 13-2 to approve the pachyderm enclosure, which will include a lush forest and water holes.

West Valley area Councilman Dennis Zine and Westside colleague Bill Rosendahl opposed the project.

Councilman Tom LaBonge, one of Griffith Park's biggest boosters and whose Hancock Park centered district

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includes the zoo, argued for the new habitat.

"We know that it's important to get the right space and believe me, I'd like to push it even more, but right now we got to make it better for them and make it safer for them," LaBonge said. "This is an investment in Los Angeles, its an investment in the Los Angeles Zoo and it's an investment for the children of Los Angeles."

Several animal rights groups oppose the elephant exhibit expansion, saying it's too costly, and the space would still be too small. Several activists called on the City Council and Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to send the animals to a sanctuary.

Zine described watching elephants living in the wild during a three-week photo safari in Africa, and said the massive animals belong in the wild.

"In the zoo, with all the good intentions there are, I don't think this is appropriate," he said before voting against the project. "The financial aspect is one, but the human aspect is the other. They belong in a natural environment, not an enclosure."

Last week, game show host Bob Barker took out radio ads calling for the elephants to be sent to a sanctuary.

"The taxpayers of Los Angeles do not want to spend \$40 million on this elephant exhibit," said Catherine Doyle of Last Chance for Animals. "Opposition to this exhibit is daunting. What are you voting on? An outdated exhibit that provides marginal improvements for the elephants that will cost the taxpayers plenty."

City Administrative Officer William Fujioka stressed that most of money for the project would not come from the city's general fund.

According to a zoo report, the elephant exhibit would be funded with \$2 million in private donations, \$25 million from bonds approved under Propositions A and CC, \$1 million from the city's general fund, and \$13 million from the Municipal Improvement Corp. of Los Angeles, which pays for capital projects.

Actress and animal rights activist Betty White regularly volunteers at the zoo and spends much of her time at the elephant exhibit, even helping to walk the pachyderms on Saturday mornings.

"I've worked with the Los Angeles Zoo for thirty-nine years, and I beg you, let's not let the opportunity go by to get a better place for these babies," White said. "The more time that goes by, the more they have to wait."

The fate of the zoo's elephants has become an issue since Tara, an African elephant, died at the age of 39 in 2004. Three pachyderms remain at the zoo, but only Billy, an Asian elephant, is on display.

Gita, an Asian elephant suffering from foot injuries, and Ruby, and African elephant, remain in a 62 hundred square foot enclosure out of the public's view.

To address Gita's foot problems, the zoo is calling for a variety of natural walking surfaces.

The proposed enclosure would replace a two acre, \$19 million "Elephants of Surin Habitat" that was proposed earlier.

American Zoo and Aquarium Association standards require that zoos provide 18 hundred square feet of outdoor space per elephant an allotment activists contend is too small. Of the two-hundred ten zoos accredited by the association, seventy-eight have elephant exhibits.

Assemblyman Lloyd Levine, D-Van Nuys, introduced a bill in February that would require elephant exhibits to include at least five acres for up to three pachyderms. The enclosures would have to provide an additional half acre for each elephant added to the exhibit.

In August, Villaraigosa ordered a study to determine whether the zoo should house elephants or move them to an accredited sanctuary.

An independent veterinarian determined that "with completion of the new expanded exhibit, it is unlikely that any other staff or facility could offer a better level of care and management than the elephants receive at the Los Angeles Zoo."

Los Angeles Zoo Director John Lewis defended his care of the elephants, but noted that larger exhibit is needed.

"The elephants at the zoo are getting excellent care," Lewis told the council. "That's been verified by an independent veterinarian, it's been verified by the veterinarians who take care of them 24-7, and it's been verified by the excellent care they get by the keepers at our institution."

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