

Opinion

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Faded jewel The zoo needs society support, new operator

DONT DONATE to the Detroit Zoological Park. Your "adopt an animal" contribution would go into the city's general fund. No chimp would get an extra banana. No lion would get an additional hunk of meat.

The zoo is a department of city government whose budget is set by the mayor and council at about \$6 million. Your \$1 gift wouldn't raise it to \$6,000,001. You would simply free up city money to be used elsewhere.

Contributions to the Detroit Zoological Society, on the other hand, do go directly to the zoo — to feed the animals and improve their environment. No zoo anywhere operates on its own parking, admission and concession revenues. The Detroit Zoo has been operated half on revenues, half on a city subsidy — and the city deserves that much credit.

Only 25 or 30 percent of zoo visitors are Detroit residents. Detroit officials have higher priorities than a zoo in Royal Oak — subsidizing bus rides, subsidizing rents, promoting boxing, aiding the Africana World Theme Park Cultural Complex within the city.

BUT THE ZOO, which Young refers to as a city "jewel," is tarnished. It can't earn accreditation by the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums. It has kept up close exhibits and struggles to keep up its facilities.

It would be no disgrace for Detroit officials to admit they can't keep the place going properly any more — as they did with the Maybury TB hospital and as they are trying to do with the DeHoCo prison — and turn it over to someone else.

Few cities run zoos any more. Toledo in 1982 turned over its zoo to the zoological society, and voters have approved two tax proposals — countywide. Brookfield Zoo in Chicago is paid for by a countywide agency and run by a private society. The Cincinnati zoo is paid for by a county tax and run by a private society. Baltimore on July 1 will turn over its zoo operations to a private society.

In Milwaukee, the zoo is a county operation. In Columbia, S.C., it's a two-county operation. Detroit is a rarity, an anachronism, in having a zoo as a city department.

IT IS NO solution for the state to pick up part of the city's \$3 million-plus cost. As new money comes in, the city would simply charge part of its police budget, part of its law department budget, part of

its council budget, part of the mayor's budget, part of the planning budget — any overhead expense a financial mind can think of — against the zoo.

That is no idle speculation. Experience shows us that Detroit has done precisely that with its Institute of Arts, its main library, its water and sewerage Department and anything else for which it receives state aid or suburban funds.

This year Gov. James J. Blanchard proposed \$1.5 million in state aid for the zoo. Wisely, the Michigan Legislature wants to specify the money as a capital grant, so that we taxpayers can see what we are getting for our money, and not watch it disappear into the jaws of the city administration.

We urge the Legislature to remain vigilant and not vote any operating money for the Detroit zoo.

THE ZOO NEEDS a better governance system than operation and subsidy by a shrinking city.

The possibilities are many: a state commission, an existing agency such as the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority (metroparks), a team effort by Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties, or a private agency such as the Detroit Zoological Society.

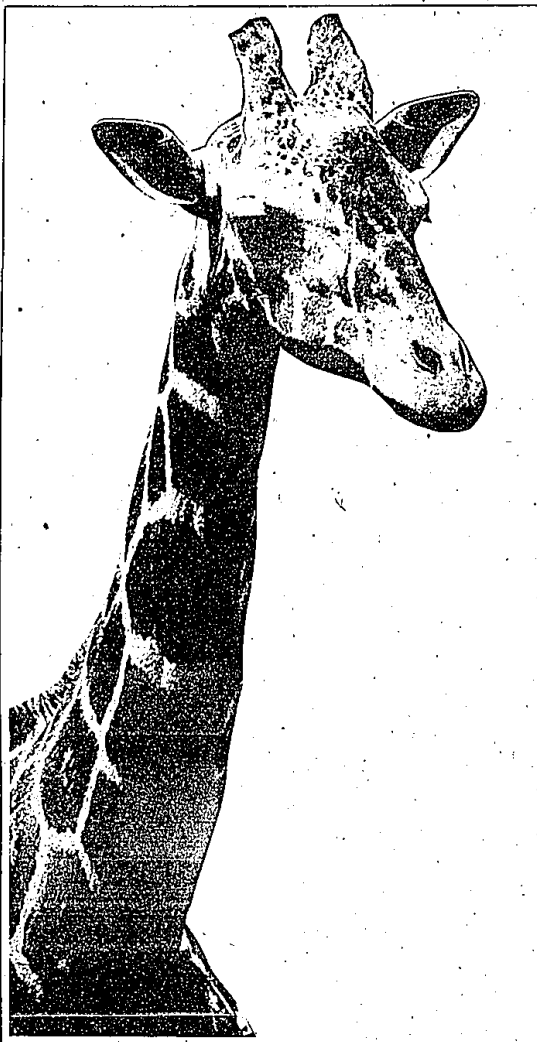
State Sen. Jack Faxon, D-Farmington Hills, has proposed the Senate establish a committee to think out the problem. So it should. Other thinking groups such as the Metropolitan Affairs Corporation and the League of Women Voters should put their minds to work, too.

WE APPLAUD the recent efforts of the Detroit Zoological Society to rejuvenate itself. This private society, which founded the Detroit zoo and gave it to the city in the 1920s, had become lethargic. Many local foundations and corporations donate to zoos elsewhere and aren't even solicited by the Detroit Zoological Society.

Robert S. (Doc) Willson, the Livonia veterinarian who is the zoo's retired director, now is working with the society to increase membership from 2,500 to 15,000. Until a new governance system is in place, the best hope of zoo lovers is to buy memberships in the Detroit Zoological Society, PO Box 8327, Royal Oak 48068.

That way the animals — not city bureaucrats — will get the benefits of people's contributions.

Observer & Eccentric Newspapers



Judith Doner Berne

Memories of my zoo roar back

I WOKE UP to the peacock's shrill call. The lions' roar invaded my last moments before sleep.

On at least one occasion, I was ordered to remain indoors because a wild animal was on the loose.

No, this was not darkest Africa but the Detroit suburb of Huntington Woods, where I grew up a street away from the Detroit Zoo.

The zoo was an integral part of my childhood.

IN THOSE days, it was closed during the winter months. And one of our prime adventures was to sneak in under the fence and investigate the zoo in hibernation.

That hole under the fence was deliberately dug out and sheltered from prying eyes. Only the "in" kids knew where it was — and each had a responsibility to maintain its camouflage after use.

The keen-eyed maintenance force knew enough to check out that north fence on a regular basis. But each time they filled in "our hole," we established a new beachhead.

THE FENCE HOLE was useful in season, too. Although in those days zoo admission was free to pedestrians, it's a long way from mid-Huntington Woods to the 10 Mile Road entrance when you're a kid walking on a hot day.

The zoo's opening each spring was equivalent to the first Tiger game of the year in our neighborhood. The sense of anticipation rippled through our grade school — Washington School in Royal Oak.

Everyone knew that at the close of classes that day, every kid old-enough to come and go on his own would head for the zoo.

We walked there in small, congenial herds, not unlike some of the animals we would see. The zoo train ride was always the first activity. But then came the agonizing decision of which stop to get off at.

THE MONKEYS, the lions and tigers, the bears, the hippos and the elephants — in their wonderful naturalistic settings — were always the favorites. Giraffes and rhinos ran a close second.

Don't overlook the elegant old birdhouse — looking like a small temple (indeed, the architect had planned Detroit's Holy Redeemer Church). And the reptile hut set off the beaten path, where they let you hold the long, scaly snakes — if it wasn't too crowded.

Which attraction did you head for first, which did you savor for last?

Then there was the Vernors-on-tap to be tested to see if it met last year's standards. And the roasted peanuts to be bought — allegedly for the animals — but most ended up in a human stomach.

DON'T FORGET the monkey show, if you had the time and money.

If not, jumping off the big rocks on the grassy expanse between the big cats and monkeys was almost as much fun — until one of our group fell and broke a bone.

There was never a question where to take out-of-town visitors. Even as a high school and college student, moved from Huntington Woods, I made it a point to visit the zoo each year.

And when my husband and I lived out of town for a while and returned to Detroit to visit, we had the pleasure of introducing our children to the zoo.

When we moved back, that was one of our first stops.

I ADMIT not having been there for a few years. The children are old enough to attend on their own. And between work and other activities, time for pleasures like zoo-going seems to be hard to come by.

But from what I have read and researched, perhaps I should rack on my memories. With exhibits closing, not opening the tenuous train situation, and other cutbacks, the state of the Detroit Zoo might be more than I could bear.

I keep thinking of the last days of the downtown J.L. Hodson's store compared with the store's last days.

closed; then floors; then the whole store; I hope that fate doesn't befall the zoo, my zoo.

A team approach to zoo problems

TO VISIT the Detroit Zoo is to be reminded of an ailing, aging animal — a huge organism afflicted by debilitating disease.

Detroit's non-accredited zoo doesn't suffer alone. Money problems gnaw at zoos nationwide, arresting their growth, or worse, eating away at them. Numerous financial formulas are used, but few mean smooth sailing for the operation of a public, multi-million dollar facility.

As governmental entities, many zoos have difficulty soliciting donations. While many have partners in "zoological societies," most have too few members who contribute too little to alleviate monetary woes.

In the United States, 170 zoological parks, wild animal parks, oceanariums and aquariums are fighting 170 fiscal battles. It adds up to frustration for dedicated zoologists. Coupled with their natural tendency to progress as professionals, zoologists realize advancements in technology, medicine, and transportation that beg action.

HURRY UNDERFOOT. Milwaukee County Zoo's assistant director of administration, finance, and marketing, says a better way. He proposes a regional consortium whereby zoos in the Midwest, for instance, would form one group to help all.

Such an organization "would tie in the major zoos with special weather-related, and animal types. We could write ourselves together in some sort of formal agreement to coordinate our resources and share information and expertise."

While Milwaukee County's zoo is healthier than Detroit's, "surviving" is the adjective Underkofler ascribes to it.

Among the Detroit Zoo's maladies: crumbling and closed exhibits; chronic underfunding and a shrinking financial base; a veterinary hospital in disrepair; and slashed staffing, animal purchases, educational programs, marketing and promotional efforts.

It makes sense for Midwestern zoos to consolidate efforts, share strengths, work on weaknesses and tackle financial troubles as a group. Certainly, private colleges have benefited from the consortium approach.

Zoos could, too.

— M.D. Dillon Ward

