

**KENT COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**

*Thursday, August 28, 2003*

**ZOO/WILDLIFE PARK WORK SESSION**

*Administration Building - Room 310*

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Meeting called to order at 9:37 a.m. by Chair David J. Morren.

Present: Commissioners Agee, Boelema, Bulkowski, Hiddema, Horton, Koorndyk, Kuipers, Mast, Mayhue, Morgan, Postmus, Roll, Tanis, VanderMolen, Vaughn, Voorhees, Chair Morren - 17.

Absent: Vonk, Wahlfield – 2 (Excused).

**INTRODUCTION**

(A copy of the staff zoo report, *The Future of a Zoological Garden/Wildlife Park in Kent County ("Zoo Report")*, which was distributed to Commissioners, is on file in the Office of the County Clerk.)

Chair Morren stated that this is the third and final work session on the zoological garden-wildlife park prior to the vote on September 11<sup>th</sup>. We have previously held a public hearing, two work sessions and have had, courtesy of *The Grand Rapids Press*, information published to the public on opportunity for public comment. The purpose of this work session is to answer any additional questions/concerns. He introduced Deputy Administrator Al Vanderberg to answer any questions.

**QUESTIONS**

**1Q.** Commissioner Voorhees asked if we have a copy of the contract that would be signed between the County and the Meijer Family?

**1A.** Al Vanderberg said that, according to Rob Verheulen, Mr. Meijer's personal counsel, there is a commitment to get one drafted but that has not been done as of yet. He did not know if it would be available before the BOC vote.

Commissioner Voorhees has a concern about voting "yes" on a contract that he has not read. If the public votes down the issue, are we working on a alternate plan where we can still move ahead with this generous gift?

Mr. Vanderberg believes that the contract will include what the process is should the millage be defeated.

Chair Morren stated that in discussions with the Meijers', the intent is for the gift to be used for the wildlife park and there has been no discussion that it would be used for anything other than that.

Commissioner Voorhees asked if we could include a time period during which we could look for other options should the millage be defeated?

Mr. Vanderberg stated that they may or may not be amenable to a back up plan on that site. He concurred with Chair Morren that it has been very clearly stated that the gift is only for a wildlife park/zoological garden on that site. However, he believes that we can discuss with the Meijers having some process in the letter should the vote fail.

Chair Morren desires an agreement prior to the BOC's vote and we will push hard to get one.

**2Q.** Commissioner Mast asked what is the budget to get everything ready to put the question on the ballot?

**2A.** Mr. Vanderberg said that there are a couple different pieces: a) funds exist to develop the ballot language; b) the master plan work beginning very soon would be funded by the Zoo Society. At some point, it would be wise to send out a "commonly asked questions and answers" mailer to residents along with the Zoo Society educating the public on the proposal. There is a fine line in Michigan law between what a county board or county staff can/cannot do with tax money as far as persuading voters to vote for something. We are not presuming that there would be a lot of County cost between now and the vote. The costs up to the ballot question would be covered by the Zoological Society.

**3Q.** Commissioner Vaughn asked if the Board passed a resolution to renovate the current zoo?

**3A.** Mr. Vanderberg said the Board passed a resolution adopting the zoo master plan to expand the current facility. The Board would not need to rescind that approval until after the public vote is taken. And after the public vote, the Board could then move to adopt a new zoo master plan and rescind the existing master plan.

**4Q.** Commissioner Hiddema asked: a) the amount of the millage; b) the length of time; c) the specified use of the monies; and, d) can the monies be used for anything other than activity at the proposed wildlife park?

**4A.** Mr. Vanderberg stated that the proposal is to do a *special* millage so that it can only be used for the purpose specified i.e., construction, operation and maintenance of a new wildlife park, should the Board decide to include all of those things in the millage. The amount will be \$150,000,000 and he prefers, of the three scenarios presented in the report, the 25-year option because it keeps the cumulative totals in the black. The 25-year option is .55 mills, which would include the debt service to fund Phase 1 of the zoo, and it would also include \$1.5 million dollars extra in an anticipated operations subsidy. Right now, the County pays approximately \$3 million/year to the zoo which takes in \$800,000 in gate revenue. It is anticipated that that subsidy would grow from \$3 million to \$4.5 million at the proposed site.

Mr. Vanderberg – There is approximately \$450,000 included in the total budget for remediation of the John Ball site. Four options were listed in the report one of which was to take all of the buildings out and return it to a natural site. Pitsch Wrecking submitted a proposal on how much it would cost to actually remove all the building and backfill the holes with fill sand. That price does not include any money to build or operate a different type of amenity there.

Commissioner Hiddema said how, if something would continue to exist at the Zoo's current site, would it be managed and financed.

Mr. Vanderberg said that it has been the staff's impression that the Board would only fund one zoological type operation so we have not proposed a scenario whereby the County would fund anything ongoing at John Ball Park. There remains at least a possibility that something could be done with the property that would compliment Millennium Park (since it is on the northeast corner of Millennium Park). The BOC has conveyed the strong message that operating/subsidizing two zoo facilities would not be something that would be appropriate or considered.

Mr. Vanderberg said that per the 1989 transfer, if the County ceases to operate the property as a zoological garden, it reverts back to the City of Grand Rapids.

**5Q.** Commissioner Morgan asked if the County has done any environmental impact studies as far as run off at the proposed site?

**5A.** Mr. Vanderberg said that the impact study included information on drainage, as far as managing storm drainage along with sanitary sewer and water and road improvements that would be necessary. No study has been done re: chemicals on site or anything like that.

Typically, that is done once the property passes into County ownership. A phase 1 study will be done and if that indicates that we need to do a further study then we do a phase 2 and a baseline environmental assessment. That protects us in the event that something is there.

**6Q.** Commissioner Mayhue asked if the millage money is to be used for Phase 1 construction and operation for what is the \$25 million gift from Mr. Meijer to be used?

**6A.** Mr. Vanderberg said that the Zoo Society and major community philanthropists were concerned with having the County and the Zoo Society seeking donations concurrent with the new art museum fundraising. In a poor economy, this would kill both projects. The Report proposes that the County build Phase 1 with millage dollars and then the private donations would fund Phases 2 & 3. There will be \$25 million of private dollars in both Phases 2 and 3. Each of those phases costs \$30 million so the sizing of the county bond at \$150 million covers construction of Phase 1 and also contributions to Phase 2 & 3 of \$5 million each.

**7Q.** Commissioner Bulkowski asked if there has been any further investigation into potential millages for next year?

**7A.** Mr. Vanderberg stated that they have not sent out the letter to school superintendents yet. The letter will go out soon so that there will at least be a week before September 11<sup>th</sup> to hear something back.

Commissioner Bulkowski asked if there has been any conversation with ITP regarding bus transportation out to the new facility?

Mr. Vanderberg said that because Grand Rapids Township is not a member of the ITP and it appears unlikely it will become a member, the County will need to negotiate a contract for that service.

**8Q.** Chair Morren stated that there have been ongoing talks about expanding and keeping a part of the zoo at its existing site. Also, that some other area such as the Butterworth Landfill would have animals on it.

**8A.** Mr. Vanderberg said that he had heard that some people think we might turn the former Butterworth Landfill into an area where we could create a game preserve type setting. Based on our limited knowledge of the use restrictions of that site, we would have major concerns. Facilities would have to be built, and we would need fencing, animal cover, etc. We would not want to transfer animals between two sites. Operating two environments, which is difficult, would increase the work of the staff and not something we would recommend.

Chair Morren said it would cost more to operate (2 locations) and the site is less than ideal because of the soils.

Mr. Vanderberg said that it is unlikely that visitors would want to visit two sites. John Lewis looked into the maintenance of two sites. Also, we do not own the Butterworth Landfill. The City of Grand Rapids does, and it is a former Superfund site.

**9Q.** Commissioner Mast asked if the County has responded to public comments about moving to Millennium Park, which we obviously cannot do. Does the general public know that is not a possibility?

**9A.** Mr. Vanderberg said it was reported twice in *The Grand Rapids Press* and the broadcast media as well that almost all of Millennium Park is in the 100-year flood. You can't get permitted or insured to build in a 100-year flood. It is in the report and on the website as well. It keeps coming up and, if the topography was different, it could have been an idea.

Commissioner Mast commented that we need to battle the perception that the County is ignoring a natural site.

Mr. Vanderberg said that if the County does a FAQ mailer that should be included.

**10Q.** Commissioner Voorhees said that he would still like to see the County move this to an independent entity, but that the feeling he gets is that now is not the time. He hopes that we will keep it in the back of our minds for later.

Chair Morren said that he strongly concurs, once it is up and going.

**10A.** Mr. Vanderberg said the Zoo Society is contracting with Schwartz Williams to work on an entrepreneurial business plan for the site. We are open to that option.

**11Q.** Commissioner Postmus complimented Mr. Vanderberg and staff for all of the in-depth studies that have been posted. As a member of a couple of different committees, he has heard all of the pros and the cons and thinks that Kent County has done a fantastic job of getting the information to the Board. We need to be more specific on the information going out to constituents. We are at a point now where we as Commissioners should consider moving this forward.

**11A.** Mr. Vanderberg said thank you on behalf of the many staff people who have supported this and done the hard work.

**12Q.** Commissioner VanderMolen - Will the Board vote on this on September 11<sup>th</sup>?

**12A.** Chair Morren - This issue will go to the Finance Committee on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, Legislative Committee September 9<sup>th</sup> and the full Board on September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Commissioner VanderMolen said that he will vote for it at Finance Committee. All the contingencies have been thought of.

**13Q.** Commissioner Bulkowski said that in terms of supporting the development of the wildlife park, are we at the lowest possible cost? Could it still work at \$100 million?

**13A.** Mr. Vanderberg said the \$150 million includes about 5 years of inflation, bond costs, etc. and we are at a very conservative figure. With the master planning and then the actual design, it may end up with something that costs less than projected, but we are not comfortable at this point in saying that we could roll it back. What has been done so far has been done conceptually and not in great detail.

**14Q.** Commissioner Kuipers - Will the FAQs be developed before September 11<sup>th</sup>, or is it not that crucial for the Board as it is for the general population?

**14A.** Mr. Vanderberg would like to provide a mass mailing (which would have some expense) the closer we got to the election so that the public would be better informed.

Commissioner Morgan asked if the Zoo Society would be involved in this?

Mr. Vanderberg said “yes,” and that the mailing needs to be drafted very carefully and he would prefer that it not be done before September 11<sup>th</sup>. It will take a couple of months for design and attorney review to make sure that we haven’t crossed the persuasion line.

Chair Morren stated that the public may attend both the Finance Committee and Legislative Committee meetings for public comment and also to hear the discussion of each committee before the votes.

#### ADJOURNMENT

At 10:08 a.m., the Work Session was adjourned.

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David J. Morren, Chair

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Mary Hollinrake, County Clerk