

**John Ball Zoo
Strategic Plan
Organizational Structure & Governance Plan
Executive Summary
February 2011**

Schultz & Williams Inc. (S&W), a national management consulting firm with extensive experience with national and international zoos, was engaged by Kent County (County) with funding support from the John Ball Zoological Society (JBZS) to perform a strategic assessment of the funding opportunities and governance options for the future management of the John Ball Zoo.

The strategic plan was developed with the guidance of a Strategic Planning Committee comprised of four members each from Kent County and the John Ball Zoological Society. Members of the Strategic Planning Committee (Committee) included Daryl Delabbio (Kent County Administrator/Controller), Sandi Parrish (Kent County Commission Chair), Mary Swanson (Assistant Kent County Administrator), Robert Tholl (then President of the JBZS), Gary Milligan (Past President of the JBZS), Kyle Irwin (President-elect of the JBZS), Bert Vescolani (Zoo Director) and Brenda Stringer (Executive Director of JBZS).

S&W developed a specific strategic plan of action for the preferred governance option.

Key findings and recommendations are highlighted below:

- John Ball Zoo has grown dramatically over the past five years and has enjoyed tremendous success with record attendance (over 425,000 visitors annually); the doubling of its earned revenues due in part to new and engaging animal exhibits; strong, and increasing, community support for its membership and fund-raising programs; and the recent five-year accreditation from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA).
- Part of the strategic planning process was to assess the long term financial sustainability of the John Ball Zoo and like other publicly financed and managed institutions the Zoo needs to find innovative ways to reduce its operating costs while expanding and/or leveraging its visitor experiences, programs, services and resources. It is important to note that Kent County is committed to the Zoo's future growth and development and will continue to provide critical financial support.
- The strategic planning process identified a conceptual pro-forma financial model that would serve as a strategic framework to allow the John Ball Zoo to be sustainable, viable and grow into the future.
- Today, over 75% of the AZA-accredited zoos are publicly-owned, but privately managed with the public partner forever owning the zoo's assets and future investments by the private partner. We believe such a public/private partnership model under one management institution would benefit the John Ball Zoo and the community that it serves.

- In collaboration with the County and the Zoo Society, the strategic planning process explored various zoo organizational structure and governance models as well as best practices. Based on that research, we believe that the best organizational structure is a public-private partnership whereby the County will retain ownership of the Zoo facility but management of all operations – animal care, facilities, education, guest services, marketing, development and administration - would be done by a single, non-profit organization.
- A dedicated millage is a funding vehicle that has been successfully implemented in zoos across this country and should be further assessed with the Kent County community. But whether the Zoo remains funded primarily by the County General Fund or a dedicated millage, there are a number of opportunities (elimination of redundancy and bifurcation of services and an entrepreneurial management approach, among them) to move forward with the more efficient partnership under a single non-profit entity.
- John Ball Zoo and the Grand Rapids/Kent County/ West Michigan community are poised to begin the shift in governance now as the Zoo and Zoo Society are enjoying strong community support. In addition, the Zoo Society is receiving enthusiastic support for its recently announced capital campaign. The donor community's belief in the Zoo as an asset and tourist attraction is evident by the generous gifts it has and is receiving, indicating that the time is right for the Zoo to move forward with a governance structure that allows it to be sustainable and grow into the future.
- Next steps will be review of the strategic governance plan by the Board of Commissioners, development of an implementation plan and the appointment of a community-based leadership committee to work through the details of a transition plan.
- We believe that a streamlined and integrated governance structure that eliminates the redundancies associated with two similarly-positioned organizations only enhances the future potential, viability and success of the John Ball Zoo.