

COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE
Inter-Office Communication

Date: 4/20/2026

To: Marcelia Nicholson-Bovell, Chairwoman, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors

From: Zoological Department/Amos Morris, Executive Zoo Director *Amos D Morris, Jr.*

Subject: Zoological Department 2025 Annual Report

File Type: Informational Report

This informational report provides a report on how the Milwaukee County Zoo set and achieved its 2025 goals.

POLICY

This report aligns to Chapter 108: Achieving Racial Equity & Health.

Milwaukee County Code of General Ordinances:	Chapter 108: Achieving Racial Equity & Health
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ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC PLAN

- 1A: Reflect the full diversity of the County at every level of County government
- 1B: Create and nurture an inclusive culture across County government
- 1C: Increase the number of County contracts awarded to minority and women-owned businesses
- 2A: Determine what, where, and how we deliver services to advance health equity
- 2B: Break down silos across County government to maximize access to and quality of services offered
- 2C: Apply a racial equity lens to all decisions
- 3A: Invest “upstream” to address root causes of health disparities
- 3B: Enhance the County’s fiscal health and sustainability
- 3C: Dismantle barriers to diverse and inclusive communities

Alignment to the above strategic goals is articulated in responses to the questions below.

BODY

Please tell us about your progress on your Department/Office's top goals in 2025. If any of your goals have changed, briefly explain why, how they are "SMARTIE" goals (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timely, inclusive, and equitable), and how they align with the County's racial equity strategy.

Goal #1: Continuously Maintain Professional Accreditation and Licensing. The Zoo received re-accreditation in the fall of 2024 from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), ensuring its continued standing until the next accreditation cycle in 2029. To maintain this status, the Zoo must consistently meet standards and stay compliant with evolving accreditation requirements. The Zoo is held to 276 specific standards, organized into 14 key categories: Animal Wellbeing, Care and Management; Veterinary Care; Conservation; Education and Interpretation; Scientific Advancement; Governing Authority; Staff; Support Organizations; Finance; Physical Facilities; Safety and Security; Guest Services; Master and Strategic Planning; and AZA Standards for Elephant Management Care.

Maintaining AZA accreditation is central to the Zoo's strategic key commitment to Care, ensuring top-tier animal wellbeing, veterinary care, and habitat design. This directly supports Milwaukee County's core values and strategic focus areas. Integrity: Just as the County values doing the right thing even when no one is looking, the Zoo follows AZA's rigorous standards and ethics to ensure animal wellbeing is always prioritized. Inclusion: The Zoo engages diverse perspectives in its planning and operations, reflecting the County's commitment to inclusive decision-making. Influence: As an AZA-accredited institution, the Zoo serves as a leader in animal care, education, and conservation, positively impacting the community and supporting the County's vision of health and equity.

In addition to AZA accreditation, the Zoo holds a USDA license, which is essential for its operation and is renewed every three years. The Zoo was re-licensed in the fall of 2023, covering the period from January 2024 through December 2026, subject to annual inspections.

Goal #2: 20% of Advertising Media Impressions are Directed Toward Diverse and Underrepresented Audiences. In 2025, the Zoo significantly exceeded this goal, with 34.4% of media impressions reaching diverse and underrepresented audiences, 14 percentage points above the target. This achievement supports the County's commitment to inclusion by ensuring more residents feel welcomed, represented, and connected to Zoo programs. It also aligns with the Zoo's strategic plan through its key commitment to "Connect" and its core value of inclusion, reinforcing the foundational principle of Culture and Community Impact.

Expanding access to nature and educational experiences is critical to community well-being. By intentionally engaging underrepresented populations, the Zoo reduces barriers to access and advances the County's priorities of inclusion, equity, and community impact.

Key lessons from 2025 include the effectiveness of culturally relevant messaging, the value of strong community partnerships, and the importance of sustained, long-term investment in inclusive outreach.

A 2026 status update is not yet available, as the Zoo's primary advertising campaign

launches in April.

Goal #3: Increase Attendance from the Previous Year by 2%. In 2025, the Zoo achieved 95% of its attendance growth target, reflecting strong performance in a highly competitive, weather-dependent environment. Sustaining and growing attendance year over year requires a continued focus on accessibility and guest engagement. Notably, while zoos nationwide experienced a median attendance decline of 18% according to the Morey Consulting Cultural Attraction Trend Report, the Zoo limited its decrease to just 2.5%, significantly outperforming national trends.

Ensuring the Zoo is an inclusive, welcoming destination for all guests is part of our long-term strategy. Increased access not only supports equity goals but also broadens the Zoo's audience and strengthens community connections. At the same time, it is essential to thoughtfully balance accessibility initiatives with revenue generation to ensure the Zoo's long-term financial sustainability and its ability to remain open and serve the community.

To advance this priority, the attached 2025 Accessibility Program outlines 34 initiatives aimed at reducing barriers and enhancing the guest experience for all visitors. The Milwaukee County Zoo program efforts represent an estimated \$1,336,605 in community value and served approximately 168,079 or 14% of Zoo guests in 2025.

Together, these initiatives reinforce that improving accessibility is both a mission-driven priority and a key driver of sustainable attendance growth, while underscoring the importance of maintaining a balanced approach between access and revenue.

The Zoo is on track to meet its 2026 attendance goal as of March 31, 2026.

Goal #4: 15% of Advertising Media Impressions are Directed Toward New Audiences. The Zoo exceeded this goal in 2025, with 22.1% of total media impressions reaching new audiences. This strong performance reflects a deliberate strategy to expand awareness, attract first-time visitors, and diversify the Zoo's audience base.

Reaching new audiences is critical to long-term attendance growth and supports broader goals around inclusion and community engagement by introducing the Zoo to individuals and families who may not have previously considered visiting. This effort also aligns with the Zoo's strategic plan, reinforcing the foundational principles of financial strength and stewardship by building a sustainable, engaged visitor base.

A status update for 2026 is not yet available, as the Zoo's primary advertising campaign launches in April.

Goal #5: 75% of Staff Participate in One Conservation Project. In 2025, 53% of staff participated in at least one conservation project. While this falls short of the annual target, the goal was introduced mid-year, limiting the time available for full implementation and participation.

Despite this, the level of engagement achieved demonstrates strong staff interest and provides a solid foundation for growth. This goal aligns with the Zoo's strategic plan through its key commitment to "Conserve", reinforcing the importance of staff involvement in conservation initiatives.

Expanding participation will remain a priority in 2026, with increased awareness and more accessible opportunities for staff to engage in conservation efforts.

1. What key factors *enabled* progress toward accomplishing these goals?

- The dedication and hard work of the staff, together with leadership and support from the County Executive's Office, County Board, and our supporting partners, the Zoological Society of Milwaukee and SSA, were key to maintaining AZA accreditation and USDA licensing for the Zoo.
- Capital investments in the Zoo are directly linked to maintaining AZA accreditation and USDA licensing, ensuring the implementation of modern zoological practices in animal care. These investments also play a crucial role in boosting attendance, as visitors are drawn to experience newly renovated habitats and enhanced exhibits.
- Attendance from the School field trip program rose by 8.3% in 2025, reaching a total of 92,658 students.
- The 25-night Wild Lights event drew 21% more guests than in 2024, totaling 48,676 guests.
- Several marketing tactics overperformed, including partnerships with PBS and FOX6. The Zoo expanded its reach by targeting new audiences, such as the Chicago market and social media followers through content creators, while also increasing engagement efforts aimed at grandparents.

2. What key factors *hindered* progress toward accomplishing these goals?

- While the Zoo offers a mix of outdoor spaces and indoor animal buildings that provide year-round experiences, visitation remains highly influenced by overall weather conditions. Unfavorable weather, such as rain, extreme heat, or cold, can still deter guests from planning a visit.
- Attendance is influenced not only by weather patterns but also by broader environmental conditions such as poor air quality and animal health concerns (e.g., avian influenza). These factors can require temporary building closures or animals to be moved indoors, limiting guest experiences. These conditions are closely monitored, and adjustments are made to operations and offerings as needed to minimize impacts on attendance.
- Rising essential costs, including housing, food and healthcare, have tightened household budgets, limiting discretionary spending on leisure and entertainment. Economic uncertainty can create consumer hesitancy in planning multi-day trips or leisure spending.
- Emerging shifts in consumer preferences and the growing variety of entertainment options are being closely monitored to ensure that new programs and experiences remain engaging, relevant and aligned with the Zoo's strategic plan.

- According to the AZA Trends Report, the Zoo's audience mix is evolving. Older Americans will make up a larger share of the population, families are becoming more diverse with smaller household sizes, and a growing number of people report disabilities (46% of Americans age 75+). With 72 million people approaching retirement age, the Zoo continues to monitor these demographic changes and adjust programs and experiences as needed and to ensure alignment with the Zoo's strategic plan.
3. If any goals are changing, please list those and briefly explain why. (Please put "N/A" if your goals will remain the same.)

N/A

FISCAL EFFECT

The report is informational only and there is no fiscal impact.

VIRTUAL MEETING INVITES

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PREPARED BY:

Vera Westphal, Deputy Zoo Director

APPROVED BY:

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ATTACHMENTS:

Zoo 2025 Accessibility Programs (PDF), Zoo 2025 Scorecard Report (PDF), Zoo 2025 Annual Report Presentation (PDF)

cc: Kelly Bablitch, Chief of Staff, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors
Janelle M. Jensen, Legislative Services Division Manager, Office of the County Clerk
Kelsey Evans, Health Equity, Human Needs, and Strategic Planning Committee Coordinator
David Crowley, County Executive
Mary Jo Meyers, Chief of Staff, County Executive
Vera Westphal, Deputy Zoo Director
Tracey Dolphin, Director Animal Management & Health, Zoo
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Matthew Haseman, Director, Facilities, Zoo
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