

COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE
Inter-Office Communication

Date: 4/17/2025

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

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

Subject: Zoological Department 2024 Annual Report

File Type: Informational Report

This informational report provides a report on how the Milwaukee County Zoo set and achieved its 2024 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

1. Please submit your Scorecard Report along with this report, to show progress on your Department/Office's top goals in 2024. If you would like to add any additional information about the extent to which you accomplished your goals, please do so here.

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 for the next five years. 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 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 2024, the Zoo successfully achieved its goal, resulting in increased engagement and heightened awareness of its programs throughout Milwaukee and the surrounding County. This initiative supports the County's commitment to inclusion by ensuring that more residents feel welcomed and represented. Achieving this goal in 2024 is significant as it provides equitable access to nature and education, which are essential for community well-being. By purposefully reaching out to underrepresented groups, the Zoo is helping to bridge the gap in access and advance the County's values of inclusion, equity, and influence. Key takeaways include the importance of culturally relevant messaging, the value of community partnerships, and the necessity for consistent, long-term investment in inclusive outreach. A status update for 2025 is not yet available, as the Zoo's major advertising campaign starts in April.

Goal #3: Increase Attendance from the Previous Year by 2%. The Zoo exceeded this goal in 2024 by increasing attendance by 3.6% over 2023, resulting in a total attendance of 1,244,762 guests. As the Zoo continues to focus on growing attendance year after year, the Zoo's commitment to accessibility remains a key priority. Ensuring that the Zoo remains an inclusive destination for all visitors is integral to our long-term strategy. To support this, attached is the Zoo's 2024 Accessibility Program, which outlines 33 different initiatives designed to enhance access for everyone, representing an investment of \$1,680,094 in community value and reaching 17% of 2024 visitors.

Goal #4: 15% of Advertising Media Impressions are Directed Toward New Audiences. This is a new goal that began in 2025. A status update for 2025 is not available because the Zoo's major advertising campaign begins in April.

Goal #5: 75% of Staff Participate in One Conservation Project Outside of the Zoo. This is a new goal for 2025 and will be included in next year's report.

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

- The dedication and hard work of the staff, combined with the leadership and support from the County Executive's Office, County Board, and our supporting partners the Zoological Society of Milwaukee and SSA, were instrumental in securing both 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.
- The mild weather in February, March and April positively influenced attendance, resulting in an increase of 42,401 compared to the budget for that period. Additionally, September and October saw an increase of 22,455 guests above budgeted expectations.
- Attendance from the School field trip program rose by 14% in 2024, reaching a total of 91,537 students.
- The Zoo's 2024 marketing plan supported Milwaukee County's broader goal of breaking down silos and improving access to services by adopting an inclusive, outreach strategy. The plan expanded its media reach to connect diverse communities across the region, incorporating a variety of media outlets such as Urban Milwaukee, Morning Blend, and Spanish-language channels. A new Wild Lights bus wrap featuring Spanish-language messaging further deepened engagement with Hispanic residents. The strategy also continued partnerships with established advertising platforms, including PBS, transit (buses), and streaming audio, ensuring an inclusive presence.

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

- While the Zoo's attendance exceeded 2023 by 3.1% or 42,919 guests, unfavorable weather conditions during the peak season and our two largest events hindered attendance, preventing the Zoo from exceeding the attendance goal by a greater margin. Specifically, the Zoo's 4-day a la Carte event was affected by rain on all four days, resulting in a shortfall of 23,470 guests, causing the event to fall below its budgeted attendance. Additionally, the Zoo's Wild Lights event, which runs for 25 nights, was also adversely affected by cold and snowy weather during many of the nights, further

reducing attendance.

- The current design of the Zoo's front entrance leads to significant traffic congestion on Bluemound Road and the surrounding highways, resulting in long wait times and safety concerns for visitors, local businesses and nearby residents. One of the most frequent complaints from Zoo guests is the lengthy wait to enter the gate. This issue was the most common guest complaint in 2024, with one in four visitors citing wait times as a major frustration. While the Zoo exceeded its attendance goal in 2024, the current design of the front entry prevents even further growth.

4. If any goals are changing, please list your Department/Office goals for 2025. (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:

Amos Morris, Executive Zoo Director

ATTACHMENTS:

Zoo 2024 Accessibility Programs (PDF), Zoo 2024 Scorecard Report (PDF), Zoo 2024 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
Matthew Haseman, Director, Facilities, Zoo
Emily Salentine, Director, Marketing and Communications, Zoo
Andrew Stockel, Director, Operations, Zoo