ARTS, PARKS, LIBRARIES, AND COMMUNITY ENRICHMENT

MOTION

On April 22, 2025, the Los Angeles Zoo announced its intention to relocate elephants Billy and Tina to the Tulsa Zoo in Oklahoma because the LA Zoo cannot meet the minimum elephant care standards required by the AZA, as stated in the zoo's official press release. Many people in the animal welfare community have been calling for these elephants to be relocated to a sanctuary for many years.

Since the zoo is a citywide asset, the Los Angeles City Council has a vested interest in the relocation of its elephants. Therefore, all options should be considered by the council before a final decision about where Billy and Tina will be relocated. These options should include the U.S. based accredited elephant sanctuaries: The Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee, and Performing Animal Welfare Society in northern California. Both of these options would provide more space than the Tulsa Zoo.

Elephants are majestic beings revered by people across the world. They are autonomous, social, and cognitively and emotionally complex individuals who have evolved to move freely across vast, varied landscapes. In the wild, elephants are active for more than 20 hours a day, foraging, bonding, and engaging in natural behaviors that support their physical and psychological health.

Scientific and observational studies spanning decades have proven that when elephants are forced to live isolated in small spaces, they often develop serious physical and emotional problems—including obesity, arthritis, reproductive and psychological disorders, and neural deterioration. The severe psychological stress of captivity has been linked to behavioral abnormalities and brain damage.

Elephants require large, dynamic environments, companionship, freedom of choice, and control over their lives. When these essential needs are not met, they suffer great physical and psychological harm.

The Los Angeles Zoo elephant program

The Los Angeles Zoo currently confines two Asian elephants—Billy and Tina—to an exhibit with only three acres of usable outdoor space, divided into four small yards. Many believe that this environment cannot meet the biological, social, or psychological needs of any elephant. The elephants are confined to tiny yards and an industrial barn, where their days are completely controlled by zoo staff. Both Billy and Tina have been observed engaging in stereotypic behavior, most frequently intense head bobbing and swaying. Elephant cognition and behavior experts consider this behavior a coping mechanism for dealing with chronic stress and it has never been observed in wild elephant populations.

Billy

Billy is a male Asian elephant who was born around 1985 while living freely with his familial herd in Malaysia. He was captured as an infant and imported to the United States in 1989. Since then, Billy has been held at the Los Angeles Zoo where he is deprived of the ability to engage in many natural elephant behaviors.

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In 2007, the Los Angeles Zoo was sued, in part, for its treatment of elephants. During the litigation, it was revealed that zoo trainers used a block and tackle to force Billy to lie down, as well as pain-inducing devices such as bullhooks and sticks with nails.

Billy has also been subjected to repeated semen collection procedures as part of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums' (AZA) captive breeding program. Over a three-year period, the zoo attempted to collect Billy's semen at least 55 times. These attempts involved restraining Billy in a restraint device that rendered him immobile while a human inserted their arm into his anus to stimulate ejaculation. Despite these repeated and invasive procedures, Billy has never sired any offspring.

In addition to enduring traumatic training, long-term isolation, and highly invasive semen collection procedures, Billy has also suffered from inadequate foot care. Foot care is incredibly important for elephants held in small unnatural environments, since foot disease is a leading cause of death in captive elephants. Records from 2023 show that the zoo did not perform regular foot care on Billy for eight months while he was in musth, resulting in overgrown nails, cracks which can lead to fatal infection, and a significant accumulation of dead tissue. Records also show Billy is overweight and has suffered from a fractured tusk.

Tina

Tina is a wild-born female Asian elephant who has spent nearly her entire life in captivity. She was taken from her familial herd in 1967, imported to the U.S. in 1969, and spent decades performing in circuses and casinos under threat of physical violence. From 1980 to 2009, she was exhibited by three different circuses.

In 2010, Tina was transferred to the Los Angeles Zoo from the San Diego Zoo with her longtime companion, Jewel, with whom she had lived for 40 years. Jewel died at the zoo in January 2023. Less than a year later, the other female elephant confined at the zoo, Shaunzi, collapsed and was euthanized.

Tina is now the only female elephant at the zoo and is kept separated from Billy. Since losing her companions, she has frequently been observed rocking and swaying. Her medical records reveal that she suffers from numerous serious conditions, including ear infections, foot issues, vulvar lesions, uterine leiomyomas, colic, and difficulty defecating. Her poor physical state and psychological decline are directly linked to her captive environment.

Zoos are moving away from exhibiting elephants

Zoos across the country are moving away from holding elephants in captivity. Several California zoos have closed their elephant exhibits, including the San Francisco Zoo, the Sacramento Zoo, the Santa Barbara Zoo, and the Oakland Zoo. In 2024, the Oakland Zoo ended its elephant program and relocated its last remaining elephant, Osh, to The Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee.

Elephant sanctuaries accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries specialize in meeting the complex biological, physical, and psychological needs of elephants. They have natural environments with vastly greater space than the Los Angeles Zoo and can help heal the trauma and damage caused by zoo captivity. Relocating Billy and Tina to an elephant sanctuary would allow them the opportunity, for the first time in decades, to live as elephants and experience genuine autonomy.

I THEREFORE MOVE that the City Council instruct the Los Angeles Zoo to report back within 30 days on the relocation options for Billy and Tina, specifically to include both U.S. based elephant sanctuaries accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries and other options. The report should evaluate the financial and humanitarian costs and benefits of all options;

I FURTHER MOVE that the City Council instruct the Los Angeles Zoo to not move the elephants or otherwise commit to where they will be relocated until the matter has been discussed and voted on by the full council.

Presented by: _____

BOB BLUMENFIELD

Councilmember, District Three

Seconded by: _____

ORIGINAL