



**Filed Testimony of  
J. Kirby Fowler, Jr., President & CEO  
The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore  
March 11, 2024**

**House of Delegates Appropriations Committee  
Capital Budget Subcommittee  
Miscellaneous Grant Programs - FY2025 Budget Hearing**

Honorable Chair and Members of the Subcommittee:

The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore is grateful for this opportunity to express support for the proposed Fiscal Year 2025 capital budget allocation of \$4,903,000 as part of the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). This proposed allocation reflects current cost estimates and project scope, the need to address emergencies and inflation, and the implementation of our ambitious Master Plan. In addition, for the first time in the history of the Animal Welfare Act, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) will be inspecting birds, which will have an impact on the Zoo by requiring a different kind of focus on a large class of animals.

Our proposed allocation covers two general categories of need: Infrastructure Improvements (\$1,700,000) and Habitat/Attraction Improvements (\$3,203,000).

**Infrastructure Improvements**

In terms of basic Infrastructure Improvements, we are looking to continue to address life-safety issues, improve Animal Welfare, and comply with USDA and accreditation requirements of the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA). In addition, we need funding to replace the perimeter fence, purchase another emergency back-up generator, and construct or replace roofs on various buildings.

Life-Safety & Compliance Projects: Among several projects in need of funding, the Zoo believes it is essential to install a new freight lift for our Gift Shop. The Zoo proposes to create an exterior access to the attic that would meet current code requirements, close the hole in the ceiling (allowing for more efficient use of the HVAC system), and free up space for additional storage. A second emergent safety problem has been 97 years in the making. The retaining wall behind the old Elephant House is structurally damaged and is visibly sliding down. It is likely that portions of the wall need to be replaced to avoid injury to guests or staff moving through that section of Main Valley. For these and other life safety and animal welfare projects, the Zoo is requesting \$1,200,000 of capital funding support.

Perimeter Fence Repair: The Zoo is required by USDA regulations to maintain an 8-foot tall perimeter fence around the entire 135 acres of the campus. Much of the fencing is in need of replacement due to general age and damage from falling trees and limbs. The Zoo is requesting \$100,000 to continue its repair and replacement work.

Emergency Back-up Generator: The Zoo has embarked upon a comprehensive program to provide much-needed energy back-up power in the event of an outage in order to maintain lighting, refrigeration, and other basic functions. The Fiscal Year 2025 request will be for one generator, costing \$100,000.

Roof Replacement: With the State’s generous support, the Zoo has made great progress to renovate dozens of buildings on the Zoo campus, but some buildings still sit in a state of disrepair due to old age. We are requesting \$300,000 in FY2025 to replace the roofs on the housing facilities for the rhinoceros and grizzly bears, as well as a life-safety system building.

### **Habitat/Attraction Improvements**

The Zoo’s new 10-Year Master Plan, released in August 2022, envisions adding new species while moving existing species into new and inviting habitats. It also anticipates placing animals in the Main Valley for the first time in 20 years so that it once again becomes a literal living part of the Zoo as well as its historic beginning. A more inviting entrance with new species is part of our strategy to attract guests and convert them into members.



Red Panda Habitat: The Zoo plans to create a new habitat for red pandas in the Main Valley that will be designed for a breeding pair. As a new mammal to the Zoo’s collection, the red pandas will be an engaging and welcome addition. In the wild, red pandas live in the Eastern Himalayas of Nepal, India, Bhutan, Myanmar, and China. They are unique in that they are their own taxonomic group known as *Ailuridae* – they are not genetically part of either the bear or panda family. In fact, they are the original panda – named “panda” fifty years before the giant panda.

The worldwide population of red pandas is only 10,000 individuals. Due to poaching, degradation, and loss of their highland habitat over the last two decades, their numbers have been decreasing at the alarming rate of 40%. Fortunately, because of their public appeal, red pandas can act as a flagship species that provides conservation to entire habitats when they are protected. There are 83 facilities that care for a total of 225 red pandas in the United States. The more facilities that have red pandas, the more attention is brought to saving them from extinction.

The red pandas will be located near the former snowy owl habitat in the Main Valley. In order to facilitate habitat construction and accelerate the arrival of red panda, several members of the Board of Trustees with a keen interest in the species donated money to pay for the design of a new habitat. Due to that funding, design drawings are underway. The Zoo is requesting \$1,643,500 to begin construction of this new habitat as soon as possible.



Eagle/Owl Flight Cage Habitats: In conjunction with the construction of the red panda exhibit, the resident snowy owl and bald eagle will be relocated to a new habitat in the Maryland Wilderness, an environment better suited for the birds. Moving the bald eagle out of Northern Passage will provide her adequate space in which to attempt to fly, and the snowy owl will benefit from a more secluded spot than its current Main Valley home. The two bird habitats and holding building will be nestled into the hill to take full advantage of the landform and existing vegetation. The birds would have the ability to fly across a broad swath of the area and be viewed in all of their splendor by Zoo guests. The Zoo's request for \$1,559,500 in capital support will advance the design work being funded by the State in FY2024, laying the foundation for construction of the interim flight cage and then the permanent habitat.

### **The Zoo and the State: An Expression of Gratitude**

The Maryland Zoo is a source of pride for the State of Maryland. It regularly partners with the State Department of Natural Resources to save animals that face unusual challenges in the wild, such as a baby otter recently separated from its mother in Harford County. Similarly, the Zoo teams up with DNR to care for many animals seized in confiscation work and to rebuild the populations of critically endangered turtles in Western Maryland. Our specialists perform cutting-edge research and train animal keepers and veterinarians to care for animals both here at the Zoo and in wild settings. Zoo employees take these skills out into the world, from the Chesapeake Bay to the coast of Africa and the mountains of Central America.



The Zoo employs approximately 200 people, the vast majority of whom are residents of the State. It creates volunteer opportunities for seniors as well as teens, a source of social interaction as well as training for careers. It provides unprecedented educational opportunities, with our school programs drawing 59,862 students and teachers for in-site visits in FY23 and another 22,655 students and teachers for virtual field trips in the same year. Students from 21 of the 24 local education agencies in the State of Maryland participated in a Zoo field trip either in-person or virtually last fiscal year.

The Zoo's mission is to create empathy and lifelong support for the conservation of wildlife and wild places. In this day and age, we need more and more opportunities to connect with one another in positive ways, reminding each other of the need to act constructively to preserve the beauty and diversity of our incredible State - and planet. We wholeheartedly believe that this mission is in perfect harmony with the important goals of the State of Maryland.

All of this has been made possible by the State's investments over the last 15 years. The aid that the State of Maryland and the General Assembly provided in that timeframe has changed the look, the feel, and the future of this venerable institution.

The Maryland Zoological Society and the staff of The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore are extremely grateful to the State for its long-standing support. **We respectfully request approval of our capital request in the amount of \$4,903,000 for Fiscal Year 2025.**