

Subject: ZooMT News Group "Zoo History Tells it All"

Tuesday, March 2, 2011 - Billings MT - The bubbly blogger asked how did the zoo get to where it is today? Where did the money go? Two very good questions and although there have been quality stories written as of recent about the zoo none of them have fully answered these questions and the current Board of Directors have decided that for the first time in the history of ZooMontana they will be completely transparent with matters related to ZooMontana. Taking ownership not only for themselves as the governing body but also taking ownership of the deeds of past boards; deeds intentional or not that have led to the current state of ZooMontana.

To get to where the zoo is at today you first need to start at the beginning the ZooMontana business plan of 1988 which stated "financial viability of the organization must be dealt with in a responsible manner", it also states gate admissions, concessions, special events and zoological society support.....will adequately fund its (the zoos) future operating expenses". The first is a true and correct statement for any organization to deal with finances in a responsible manner but it is a broad statement. The business plan indicated the need for \$4.5 million dollars to begin phase one of the zoo. Fundraising went well but in 1994 during the planning phase meeting minutes show one members concern over "where have zoo dollars been spent?" Documents also show in 1998 the board borrowing from restricted accounts to cover operational needs as well as a financial deficit of \$232,000. In September 1999 the current executive director had to advise the AZA accreditation commission of the zoos financial deficit stating "the major stumbling block this fiscal year has been the dismal results of the annual fund drive with which the board agreed to raise over \$225,000 in operating revenue." Further stating "the poor board performance for this annual fund drive has lead to a decision by the board to retain fundraising professionals". Zoo documents in 1999 show statements made by a board members saying "I think that we have become a very dysfunctional board". The letter was written after the termination of the executive director calling for the board to "get united" and "work hard to overcome challenges". The zoo continued to falter with the continued use of restricted funds for operations. In April of 1999 documents show the zoo borrowed \$4,708.24 from restricted funds to pay zoo payables. In July 1999 the Murdock Trust awarded the zoo a \$220,000 grant for a snow monkey exhibit with the understanding it was fully funded. However, board meeting minutes indicate there was still \$110,000 needed to fully fund this venture. The trust sent half of the grant amount in October 1999 and was not refunded their money until 2004 when then zoo director Mike Carter was left with the mess to clean up and did so. In October 2000 a board member wrote a letter to his fellow board members stating "we must tell the public the truth. We have a serious cash-flow problem" it also states "if we do not admit that we have a cash flow problem we have no credibility." A statement that was as honest as any member of the zoo board has ever been also siting the boards need to "cease our current floundering and undirected activities".

To date most of the restricted funds have been cleared up by directors Mike Carter and Jackie Worstell. There is still an outstanding restricted lynx account that was tapped into back in 2000, board president Ian McDonald states "this has been a number one priority for the current board of directors to correct this last wrong." The October 2000 letter is the most telling of why these things occurred stating 1) no one has any idea how much money we need to get through the next three months, next six months (winter season) 2) no budget was prepared 3) no genuine strategy to seek government support.

Zoos are not a profitable business in and of themselves. They are extremely expensive. Jack Hanna advised the original founders of the zoo of this very fact advising them to seek an additional source of revenue whether it be public funding or other on-site revenue generating attractions, for no zoo in the country lives off of admissions, concessions, etc alone as the original business indicated ZooMontana would. Past board meeting minutes state in 2003 the zoo only had enough revenue left to make it to opening day. Financial deficits documented are FY2002 \$63,548, FY2003 \$318,103, FY2004 \$248,891, FY2005 \$278,192 FY2006 \$198,000 in recent years director Worstell has been able to keep the deficit under \$100,000 each FY. "With the zoo there are no easy cuts to make and any and all that can be made we have made". Stated McDonald "we currently operate under the same budget as the zoo did ten years ago so I think that really says something about how efficient the entire staff at ZooMontana are as well as how hard our current board and director have worked to get the zoo out of debt and make it fiscally sound."

The board met with a financial expert to discuss the zoos financial situation as it was agreed just barely getting by each year is unacceptable for an organization given the privilege to house and care for endangered species. "AZA institutions are among the best and we (ZooMontana) have the best director, staff and veterinarian what we don't have and never have had is financial stability and we owe it to the staff and community to meet our board obligation to ensure the organization is fiscally sound." McDonald said. "For too long the ZooMontana board of directors have not met their obligations often pointing the finger at the zoo directors and we are going to be the first board to own up to the problem the governing body created and face it head on." A 2006 letter from the AZA accreditation commission had six major continual concerns with ZooMontana; insufficient past and uncertain future funding, director must have final authority regarding day to day management, inappropriate level of board involvement in management of the zoo, board's adherence to its bylaws, high rate of turnover in the executive director position and veterinary program. All issues have been addressed except one; uncertain future funding.

McDonald and the board of directors realize they have a huge job of correcting wrongs of the past twenty years, made more difficult by the fact unlike the original founders they are responsible for staff and the animals. "We believe in our director who has dealt with and corrected more wrongs in her short tenure than entire boards have done over the past 20 years as well as the excellent staff but we are realistic in the fact that there is only so much giving ability in Billings." McDonald said "I feel it was my responsibility as well as that of this board to for the first time paint a true picture for the community and let them decide if they want to keep ZooMontana in their back yard or not."

Donations can be made to ZooMontana by logging on to www.zoomontana.org , mailing in a donation to 2100 S Shiloh Road, Billings MT 59106 or dropping it off at the zoo on your next visit. When you pay they stay.

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