



TASK FORCE

Task Force Findings & Recommended Next Steps

Final Report

November
2019

Introduction

Relevant Strategies & Solutions (RS&S) was engaged in 2019 to support the Little Rock Zoo (Zoo) and the Arkansas Zoological Foundation in developing an **actionable plan** to secure its financial viability and sustainability and to leverage its investment in new, compelling animal and visitor attractions through the establishment of a public funding initiative.



With its 100th anniversary approaching in 2026, the Little Rock Zoo has much to celebrate:

- a rich history providing guests with a quality recreational experience
- an important voice delivering critical conservation education messages
- a solid reputation as a deeply embedded and highly valued community asset
- a key role as the state's largest and only accredited zoological institution

Though a treasure to Little Rock and Pulaski County as a community resource, the Little Rock Zoo holds much untapped potential.

Now the Zoo is thoughtfully considering how to approach its second century – how to advance its mission and pursue its vision to provide unique and inspirational experiences that connect visitors to the wonders of the natural world, validate the importance of conservation, and position the Zoo as a premier destination in central Arkansas and as a key contributor to the economic health and vitality of Little Rock and the surrounding regions.

Overview

The Zoo sits in the heart of Little Rock in War Memorial Park at the epicenter of the mid-town neighborhood and the 12th Street Corridor. Despite its rich and long-standing history, the Little Rock Zoo has faced numerous challenges in recent years:

- The Zoo does have a compelling facility master plan; however, there has been minimal investment in the projects outlined in the plan.
- With no new major exhibits or programs (due to the minimal capital investment), the Zoo offers guests no compelling reasons to visit.
- With no new major exhibits or programs, the Zoo's annual attendance has decreased.
- With minimal capital investment, the Zoo's deferred maintenance needs are steadily increasing.
- The Zoo's staffing model is also challenged: there is an unbalanced mix of full-time and part-time employees, as well as a significant number of full-time position vacancies. This instability makes caring for the Zoo and its animal collection challenging.
- The lack of capital and staffing investment in the Zoo places the Zoo's accreditation status with the AZA (Association of Zoos and Aquariums) at risk.



Maintaining AZA accreditation was identified as a significant “must-have” in a recent research poll within the local and regional communities.

- Findings from a recently conducted fundraising feasibility study revealed donors' reluctance to contribute private support without a significant investment from the City first.
- The Zoo's current annual operating budget is currently underfunded by \$1.2 - \$1.75 million. This excludes its capital investment needs.
- The City's annual funding investment in the Zoo has been uncertain and somewhat arbitrarily subject to funding cuts, challenging the Zoo's ability to commit to more ambitious, multi-year planning and/or implementation projects and undercutting the Zoo's ability to build up donor confidence and leverage additional support.

The Task Force was comprised of the following individuals:

Name	Affiliation
Brad Cazort	Chair of the Zoo Board of Governors
Lisa Buehler	Chair of the Arkansas Zoological Foundation; Owner, Allegra & Image360 - Little Rock
State Senator Joyce Elliott	Vice-Chair of the Mayor's Quality of Life Subcommittee for the Scott Script
Kathy Webb*	City Ward 3 Director; Liaison to the Zoo Board of Governors
Mallory Jayroe	Generation Zoo Young Professionals
Chad Causey	Causey Law Firm; Board Member, Arkansas Zoological Foundation
Joni Lee	Vice Chancellor of University Affairs, U of A at Little Rock
Hank Kelley	CEO/Partner, Flake & Kelley Commercial
Tab Townsell	Executive Director, Metroplan
Rhonna Wade	Chair, Create Little Rock
Gretchen Hall	Executive Director, Little Rock Convention & Visitors Bureau
Brandon Bibby	Associate AIA, WER Architects/Planners
Nate Coulter	Director, Central Arkansas Library System
Susan Altrui, Ex Officio	Zoo Director
Bruce Moore, Ex Officio	City Manager
Jay Chessir, Ex Officio	President & CEO, Greater Little Rock Chamber of Commerce



*Kathy Webb was unable to attend one meeting and Capi Peck from City Ward 4 attended in her absence.



While accreditation is at risk, which is a serious issue, the above challenges facing the Zoo ultimately threaten the Zoo's continued viability and sustainability.

In acknowledgement of the gravity of the situation and at the request of the Mayor of Little Rock, a Task Force of community stakeholders was convened, in partnership with the Arkansas Zoological Foundation. The Task Force was charged with providing leadership in assessing the current financial and operational status of the Little Rock Zoo; exploring new sustainable funding strategies and options; and outlining next steps to strengthen the Little Rock Zoo's viable and sustainable business model. The Task Force explored public-sector funding models (City, County, State and regional funding models) that have successfully been implemented at AZA zoos throughout the country. This model and subsequent funding plan would make the Zoo viable and sustainable while serving to leverage new partnerships, new donors and benefit the City of Little Rock and Pulaski County residents and visitors.





The Task Force met twice, once in July 2019 and again in November 2019. Each Task Force meeting was facilitated by the RS&S consulting team. This document serves to capture the findings from these meetings and outline next-steps for how the Zoo can move forward as a viable and financially sustainable organization.

Additionally, the Little Rock Zoo Kid Task Force brought together a group of children ages 7 to 11 that live in the city of Little Rock. Over the course of two meetings the kids learned about what animals need to survive, why we have animals here at the Little Rock Zoo, and gave their input on what kinds of animals they want to see and what kinds of experiences they want to get out of a trip to the Zoo.

Through these two days it was discovered that the participants all generally want two things out of a trip to the Zoo: they want opportunities for up close encounters with animals, to see animals that are actively exhibiting natural behaviors, and they want opportunities for active learning about the animals in the Zoo's care and what they can do to help them at home. The full report from the Kids Task Force is attached as Appendix A.

The Planning Process



The focus for the Task Force was to define the “why,” “what” and “how” of a new funding initiative. Answering the following questions would provide the structure for the Little Rock Zoo to remain a viable and sustainable community and regional asset:

Why is a new funding initiative important for the Zoo now?

What is needed to get the funding initiative on the ballot?

How does the Zoo ensure its success?

Why?

Zoos offer their communities a quality-of-life, family-focused, educational and recreational asset. They are an educational resource, offering opportunities for hands-on learning experiences related to wildlife conservation. As the only AZA-accredited institution in Arkansas, Little Rock Zoo serves as a regional tourist attraction. Zoos that are making investments in their facilities attract additional tourists. In fact, each year over 181 million people visit an AZA-accredited zoo or aquarium throughout the country, making zoos a treasured recreational and educational asset. In addition, zoos are a source of immense community pride.

There are also economic benefits within the communities that zoos serve. In 2018, AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums contributed more than \$22.5 billion to the U.S. economy and supported nearly 200,000 jobs.

Investing now in the Little Rock Zoo would enable the Zoo to realize its vision along with all of the benefits mentioned above. The Zoo will be in a position to implement dynamic, guest-centric plans and exhibit animals in naturalistic settings while delivering

compelling educational messages and one-of-a-kind, engaging experiences that create a sense of wonder and adventure. With an innovative, thoughtful approach incorporating best practices, strategic thinking and ambitious goals, the Little Rock Zoo seeks to re-define its zoo experience as a world-class zoological institution and premier destination in Pulaski County and all of central Arkansas.

The Little Rock Zoo aspires to provide unique and inspirational “experiences” that connect visitors to the wonders of the natural world and position the Little Rock Zoo as a premier destination in central Arkansas and a key contributor to conservation education and the economic health and vitality in the region.

In addition, by investing now, the Zoo can capitalize on its impending 100th anniversary in 2026 to undertake an ambitious initiative that will redefine the Little Rock Zoo experience, rebuild the Zoo’s facilities, reform the funding equation and rekindle its commitment to family fun. Investing now so that the Zoo can achieve these initiatives in advance of its centennial will enable the Zoo to fully leverage the momentum that comes with such a milestone.



Why?

Specifically, the Zoo's 2018 updated facility master plan includes expanding the Zoo outside its existing acreage into three holes of the recently closed War Memorial golf course providing opportunities to:

Create an iconic African exhibit with giraffes and an interactive feeding deck that will offer a new visitor experience and address public surveys showing overwhelming support for building a new giraffe habitat.

Connect the Zoo with the Hilary Rodham Clinton Children's Library, War Memorial Park and the 12th Street Corridor, thus uniting these cultural and community amenities.

Build interactive facilities that engage and excite visitors, while also providing the highest-quality animal care and sharing relevant conservation stories.

With this investment, the Little Rock Zoo will offer an experience that inspires children and adults alike about the wonders of our natural world. The Little Rock Zoo will be one of the best in the south for wildlife conservation, education and recreation.

With increased capital and operating funding investments, the Zoo will build out its facility master plan, which would increase annual visitation to over 550,00 visitors, support an operating budget of \$12-13 million and generate an annual economic impact to the Little Rock region of over \$20 million from its annual operations.



What?

To realize the vision and its subsequent benefits to the Zoo and greater Little Rock community, the Zoo needs a new source of funding to ensure its long-term financial sustainability. Based on the Zoo's multi-phased facility master plan buildout and the immediate need to address its underfunded operations, the Zoo requires at least \$15 million in annual support from this new funding source. The Task Force reviewed the Zoo's current financial model, future pro forma projections and its phased but integrated facility improvements that supports the Zoo's compelling vision. In addition, the Zoo would also require the City of Little Rock to continue its annual \$3 million operating appropriation until the Zoo is positioned to generate higher earned revenue as a result of its capital investments. The Phase 1 improvements, which would be completed within five years, would allow the Zoo to invest in the critical capital and infrastructure needs to draw major increases in attendance and transform its future trajectory.

With this new funding model, the Little Rock Zoo has the potential to establish new public-private partnerships that will realize several critical objectives:

Establish a sustainable funding source for Zoo operations

Position the Zoo for annual growth in its attendance, donors and operating revenues

Promote additional corporate and educational partnerships to leverage funding

Create mutually beneficial connections with other cultural, recreational and educational organizations throughout Little Rock and central Arkansas

Spur additional opportunities for smart development and growth in and around Little Rock and Pulaski County.



How?

There are two primary opportunities to secure the Zoo's viability and financial sustainability.

Secure a New Dedicated Source of Revenue through a Public Funding Initiative

With the Zoo's current under-funded operations and the current challenges of securing contributions from private donors, a dedicated public source of revenue from a sales tax is the only option to secure the capital and operating funds needed to support the Zoo. The Zoo's facility master plan is estimated to cost \$90-100 million (in 2019 dollars) over a 10-year timeframe.

Since these funds will need to be above and beyond the City's current annual contribution, there must be a public funding initiative on the ballot prior to the end of the 2020 QTR 2 (June 30, 2020).

One option that the Task Force discussed was a City referendum with Parks for a sales tax. This funding initiative could generate \$25-\$50 million annually for the Parks and the Zoo depending on the City's assessment of half or full cent sales tax. It would provide dedicated revenues for both operations and capital investment.

In addition, this "new" money would provide a savings to the City because its current annual investment in the Zoo – once the Zoo is generating more earned revenue as a result of capital improvements – could be reallocated to support other City services.

Shifting Governance to a new Public-Private Partnership

With a new dedicated funding model, the Zoo will need a more effective operating and governance model to administer and maximize these funds. A shift in governance will foster long-term financial viability and operational excellence, as well as create a unified leadership structure and potential cost savings for the City of Little Rock. The proposed model would be a public/private partnership under a management agreement between the City of Little Rock and the current support partner, the Arkansas Zoological Foundation.

This new governance model has been successfully implemented in many cities, all with positive impacts on guest experience, attendance and financial sustainability for the Zoo. Most recently, the Reid Park Zoo in Tucson, Arizona with its recently approved sales tax initiative for the Zoo.



Conclusion

The Zoo Planning Task Force positively supported the options presented in this report, identifying a new funding model and governance structure for the Zoo. The Zoo Foundation has already been laying the groundwork for the new governance model and to support a dedicated sales tax referendum for the Little Rock Zoo.

A great zoo is a hallmark of a great city. The new vision and facility master plan for the Little Rock Zoo will become a rally point and source of pride for the community. It will become a destination for out-of-town visitors, increasing revenues for the Zoo and the local economy. The opportunities outlined above will not only enable the Little Rock Zoo to perform with maximum efficiency, but will also help to engage donors and partners who will work together to guarantee the Zoo's continued viability and sustainability, benefiting the residents of and visitors to the City of Little Rock and the entire state of Arkansas.



Appendices Attached:
Appendix A – Kids Task Force Report



Appendix A

Summary

The Little Rock Zoo Kid Task Force brought together a group of children ages 7 to 11 that live in the city of Little Rock. Over the course of two meetings, through guided activities and discussions, the kids learned about why we have animals at the Little Rock Zoo, the purpose behind modern zoos, what animals need to survive and thrive and why we might plan for some species over others. In addition, the kids gave their input on what kinds of animals they want to see and what kinds of experiences they want to get out of a trip to the Zoo.

Within these two days, it was discovered that the participants all generally want two things out of a trip to the Zoo: (they want) opportunities for up-close encounters with animals, to see animals that are actively exhibiting natural behaviors, and they want opportunities for active learning about the animals in the Zoo's care and what they can do to help them at home.



Report Findings

Day One

Participants included: Whitman, Chana, Mia, Ava, Savannah, Amelia, Ayden, Hadley, Charlie, Grant, and Averie.

We began with a name game, everyone introduced themselves and listed an animal that began with the first letter of their name. We discussed everyone's favorite animals, there were many and some had expected answers (elephant, tiger, and penguin) but there were some more specific surprises (caracal and pangolin).

The kids were taught what animals need to thrive in the zoo environment and got into designing their own exhibits. Savannah designed a seal/sea lion exhibit featuring large glass windows for underwater viewing, a space for seal/sea lion presentations, rocks for them to lounge on, a designated feeding space, and an underwater tunnel so that guests can view the seals/sea lions swimming gracefully around them. Amelia designed an aquarium where guests can get up close to all kinds of fish, marine reptiles, and dolphins. She made a point to include a touch pool so that guests can connect with smaller marine life. Ayden designed a giant panda exhibit where the guests can look at the pandas and the pandas have climbing opportunities to get eye level with guests. Hadley designed a large exhibit for wolves, with plenty of natural

foliage so they look like they're in their natural environment and guest viewing in a cave so the wolves can keep cool/warm and still be visible while resting. Charlie designed an exhibit for red panda, with plenty of climbing opportunities, and with guest viewing both at ground level and elevated to be able to see the pandas even when they were climbing up high. Whitman designed a giant anteater habitat featuring a lot of foliage to mimic their natural environment and with artificial ant mounds for them to use and show off their natural behaviors. Mia designed an okapi exhibit featuring plenty of foliage and a large window to get an unobstructed view of the animals. Chana designed a seal exhibit with plenty of room for a show so that guests can see their natural behaviors. Averie designed an enclosure for Antarctic penguins, with an underwater viewing tunnel and plenty of land space for on exhibit breeding and chick rearing. Grant designed a lar gibbon exhibit (specifically for Little Rock Zoo's own Murphy), and he included plenty of climbing opportunities, and large glass viewing windows to provide an unobstructed view of the gibbons swinging around and showing off their brachiating skills. Ava designed a giant panda exhibit featuring both elevated viewing to see the pandas climb up to eye level and ground level viewing to see them eating bamboo shoots.





Improving the Zoo

After the participants met one of our ambassador African penguins, they were asked what they would do to improve the Little Rock Zoo. There were many good ideas, many of the kids loved the idea of a slide through the otter water area (featured in the 2014 Little Rock Zoo Master Plan), many wanted an aquarium with marine animals and a touch pool, as well as a giraffe exhibit with an opportunity to get up close and feed them. Other ideas included: paying staff more, improving the train, and increasing the size and quality of some of our enclosures.



Three Main Points

The three main points that stood out during this activity included:

The kids want to be able to see animals from a variety of viewing points and perspectives, they want to see animals doing what they would be doing in the wild, and they want to be able to see animals indoors when it is too cold or too hot for them to be outside.

Favorite Exhibits

When the activity was completed the kids were asked, "What is your favorite exhibit and why?" The answers further reinforced the earlier observation that kids like to get up close to animals and see them exhibiting their natural behaviors. The favorite exhibits included: bears, specifically the grizzly exhibit where they can see them in their natural habitat on the other side of the glass. Next, the chimpanzees were a top favorite. They are located at eye level on the climbing structures and exhibiting natural behaviors as they would in the wild. Another favorite is the penguins. They were a favorite due to the experience of watching them swim up to you under water next to the glass. An additional favorite was the reptile house for the variety of animals you get to see up close. And, lastly, the big cats, specifically seeing the lions up close was a highly memorable experience.



Day Two

Participants included: Amelia, Chana, Hadley, Mia, Averie, Savannah, Ayden, Charlie, Grant, Whitman, Jonah, and Daniel.

We began with a name game, so we could get a refresher on everyone's names. We discussed that zoos are very important and that they exist to save species from extinction, and how everyone can help at home with this task.

The kids were challenged to design their own zoo but there were some constraints. They each had 30 acres on which to build their zoo and a list of animals to choose from that each required a different amount of space per individual. One of the goals of zoos is breeding endangered species. They had to make room for at least two of each animal they chose. In addition to animals, they could choose from a zoo adventure train and a zoo adventure zip line that took up two acres each, a carousel, and a zoo café that took up one acre each, and a herpetarium and a tropical bird house that took up four acres each. The animals available included: African lion, reticulated giraffe, mandrill, white handed gibbon, cheetah, greater kudu, Asian elephant, orangutan, sloth bear, Malayan tiger, clouded leopard, plains zebra, cow, and Boer goat. After they finished their activity we discussed as a group

what made it into their zoo and what didn't and the reasoning behind their choices. Many of the kids chose to prioritize highly endangered species, like Malayan tigers, even though they required more space than some of the other options. Almost every zoo designed included space for a zoo adventure zip line, a zoo café, and either a herpetarium or an aviary, though many included both. The most popular animals were the Asian elephants, African lions, sloth bears, clouded leopards, and giraffes. Through the design process, many planned their zoos geographically, by grouping African animals and Asian animals together. Several of the kids created mixed species exhibits with the hoof stock (zebra, greater kudu, and giraffe) that were available.



Favorite Activities

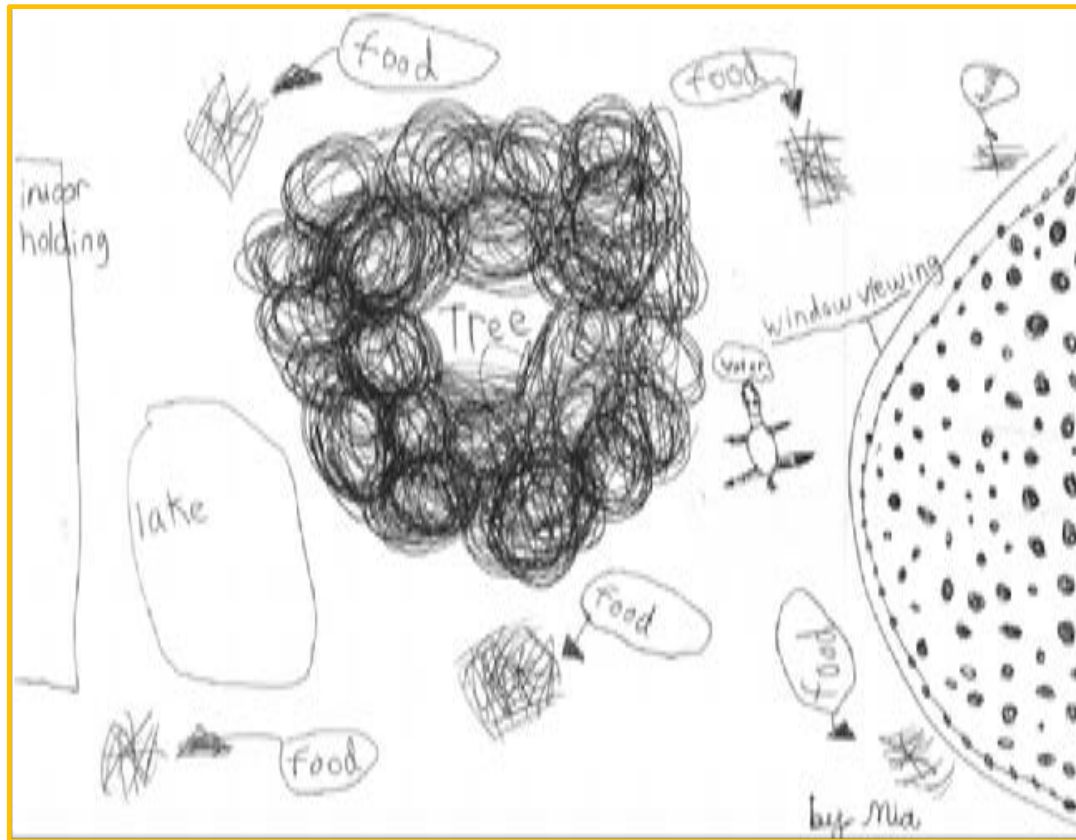
After the activity, we discussed what everyone's favorite things to do was when they visit the Little Rock Zoo. The three main answers included: playing on the playgrounds with friends and family, watching the animals exhibiting natural behaviors, and the up close lorikeet and farm feeding encounters. Next, we asked what kinds of exhibits and experiences they wanted to see that the Zoo doesn't currently have. The answers included: giraffes and a giraffe feeding deck, an aquarium with reef fish, sea horses, and a touch pool, seals/sea lions with a show, opportunities to camp at the Zoo, some kind of water feature like a wading pool or splash pad, a zip line/ropes course, an exhibit for nocturnal animals, a butterfly garden around the café to eat lunch in, an interactive zoo app, and more opportunities for active learning/parallel play with animals (sliding through the otter exhibit, seeing if they can run as fast as a cheetah, climbing and swinging near monkey/ape exhibits, etc...).

Final Points

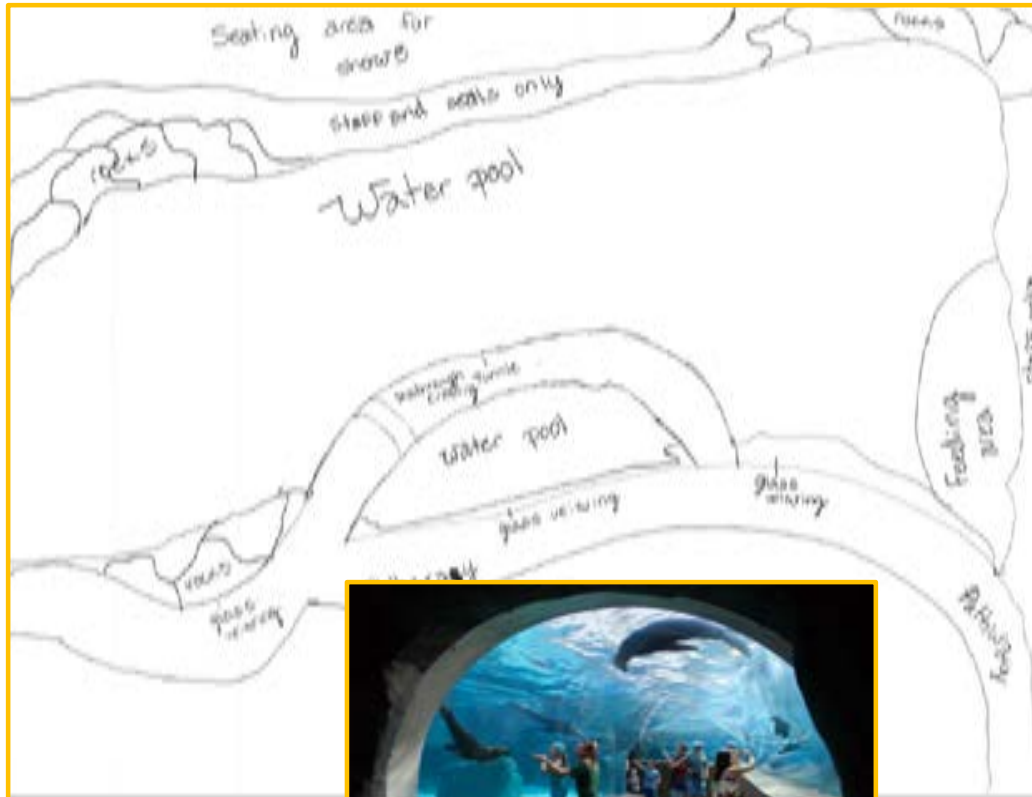
We rounded out this session by asking the kids what animals they would want to see that we don't currently have. Many answers echoed what had already been said including giraffes, sea lions/seals, and an aquarium. And, other answers included: wolves, okapi, "cool birds," bats, Indigo snakes, and bald eagles. The kids ended their visit with a trip down to the rhino barn to meet Johari. They all really enjoyed getting up close with one of the stars of the Zoo!



Day 1: Design an Exhibit



Day 1: Design an Exhibit



Day 1: Design an Exhibit



Day 2: Build a Zoo

