

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa
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Los Angeles, CA 90012
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Dear Mayor Villaraigosa,

People around the world are saddened by the death of Gita, a 48-year-old Asian elephant who lived at the Los Angeles Zoo. On the morning of June 10, keepers discovered her on the ground, unable to rise. Swift medical attention could not save Gita from the foot disorders and arthritis that plague captive elephants and cause more fatalities than any other ailment.

In 2005 you ordered a complete appraisal of the "housing and health needs" of elephants at the Los Angeles Zoo and instructed the City Administrator Officer to conduct an assessment. I understand you also temporarily suspended funding for an exhibit expansion that could cost taxpayers over \$50 million to give elephants 3.5 acres of space.

The CAO's biased findings and subsequent recommendation to sustain the elephant exhibit appear even more unfounded in the event of Gita's death. While I applaud your past efforts to support animal welfare, I am disappointed you did not veto the City Council's April 19, 2006 vote to proceed with the renovated elephant display.

I realize as Mayor you may feel obligated to address other municipal concerns. However, please know your constituents and citizens worldwide care deeply about the plight of captive elephants. The LA Zoo's reputation continues to plummet with the premature death of African elephant Tara in 2004 followed by Gita's passing. Surviving elephants Ruby and Billy will suffer a similar fate unless you take immediate action to move them to PAWS Sanctuary in Northern California.

Clearly, zoos are unable to supply the space, exercise or social enrichment necessary to fulfill the physical/psychological needs of elephants. A simulated environment — no matter how innovative or optimally maintained — cannot replicate the wild where elephants roam 20 to 50 miles everyday, pausing to swim in watering holes or indulge in dust baths. While the LA Zoo's proposed expansion affords elephants a few more acres, sanctuaries such as PAWS provide hundreds of acres.

Elephants form complex social bonds. In the wild, they roam in family groups of 10 to 12 and females retain lifelong ties with their mothers. Males may remain in the herd until 10 to 15 years of age. Within the secluded confines of a zoo, an elephant's lifespan is shortened from 50-70 years to 40-45 years. An estimated 50% endure chronic arthritis and foot abscesses from insufficient exercise and endless hours upon hardened surfaces. Some elephants succumb to *zoochosis*, a type of psychological distress, and tuberculosis also spreads among elephants in captivity.

Mayor Villaraigosa, I implore you to do the right thing. Please relocate Ruby and Billy to a free-range refuge where they can savor relative freedom before it is too late. I urge you to emulate the decision of other respected national zoos that have permanently closed their elephant exhibits.

Thank you,