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Dear Mayor Gavin, San Francisco Board Of Supervisors, and San Francisco Zoo Director Manuel Mollinedo:

As officials seek “a better understanding of what actually happened” in the fatal mauling of Carlos Sousa Jr., 17, at San Francisco Zoo on Christmas Day, one answer is overlooked. Tatiana, the 350-pound Siberian tiger who attacked three visitors, did not relish life behind walls and moats.

San Francisco Zoo director Manuel A. Mollinedo now concedes Tatiana likely scaled her display’s 12.5 feet high wall. But even if 16.4 feet walls — the minimum size recommended by Association of Zoos and Aquariums — had prevented her escape, Tatiana’s impulse to flee would still exist.

Last year Tatiana tore the flesh from a zookeeper’s arm. Mr. Mollinedo said she “was acting as a normal tiger does.” He is right. But when Mr. Mollinedo seems puzzled over this year’s lack of warning signs and describes Tatiana as “very well-adjusted into [her] exhibit,” he misses the point. Wild, roaming animals do not belong inside exhibits in the first place.

Stringent safety measures to protect zoo patrons are not enough. I urge city and zoo officials to phase out the tiger exhibit at San Francisco Zoo and release surviving animals to a captive wildlife sanctuary such as PAWS in Galt, California.

A 2003 Oxford University study lists lions, tigers, cheetahs and other large carnivores as lousy candidates for captivity. “It could be that...some species find roaming pleasurable,” states research biologist Dr. Georgia Mason. “They might be designed in such a way that roaming makes their central nervous system develop properly.”

Open-air enclosures with strategically placed flora cannot replicate a tiger’s range, social structure, or hunting patterns. Siberian tigers need vast forest terrain to survive. Roughly 330-370 adult Siberian tigers remain in the wild, mostly in the Russian Far East where they face habitat disintegration from human expansion, depletion of prey base, poaching, and trade in tiger parts for Traditional Chinese Medicine.

Efforts to stabilize populations within native habitats are crucial. I respect the San Francisco Zoo’s commitment to endangered wild cat species, but urge you to promote preservation of Siberian tigers in the Russian Far East — rather than within the artificial confines of a zoo.

Tatiana’s brief life ended with a bullet outside the zoo café. A teenager died and two more were wounded. Please let remaining tigers savor relative freedom in the open space and organic setting of a sanctuary like PAWS.

Sincerely,