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Zoo Atlanta unveils ambitious revamp

\$100M-\$200M project would change entrance, add features

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The Zoo Atlanta of the future will have a larger Africa exhibit with more elephants, include aquarium-like underwater viewing of frolicking hippos and return the entry to its original space off Boulevard Avenue.

Zoo officials released the preliminaries of its revamping of the attraction to city officials and community leaders this week after more than eight months of study. The project would take 10 to 15 years to complete because the work would be done without closing the attraction.

While there is no official price tag, Zoo Atlanta Chief Executive Officer and President Dennis Kelly said the changes could cost \$100 million to \$200 million.

"It's less than the (Georgia) aquarium," Kelly joked.

The Georgia Aquarium, the world's largest fish tank, opened in November 2005 at cost of about \$300 million.

Zoo Atlanta, which had its last renovation in the 1980s, is undertaking the revamp for a number of reasons, Kelly said. The zoo needs more room for additional animals, including three recently born lion cubs that have been briefly making their debut this week.

Kelly is especially interested in reaching more visitors. He wants the ability to accommodate 10,000 visitors a day and envisions upgrading many of the exhibits for animals and guests, including adding more air conditioning.

"Either you grow or do more things or you die," Ace Torre of Torre Design Consortium, the architect on the project, told leaders.

"There are issues causing us not to grow, including capacity," he said.

The new design calls for the zoo to stay in its current roughly 35-acre to 38-acre footprint inside Grant Park. Officials had toyed briefly with the idea of moving to Lakewood fairgrounds.

In staying put, Torre said much of the zoo would flip from its current position. Areas that are now used by zoo staff would become public areas, while others, including an Atlanta Parks facility near the attraction, would be used for staff and animal care.

Under the proposal, the zoo would build an animal hospital, relocate just about all the animals to new exhibits, but

keep the Willie B, panda and Education and Conservation buildings.

"This plan is still wet cement, but it's about 85 percent to 90 percent done," he said. "We really want this to be a jewel of the metro area.

Kelly said in most cities, about 23 percent of the population visits the zoo. In Atlanta, the number is about 17 percent. He wants to increase that number to 1 million visitors annually in the next decade. The zoo had 830,000 visitors in 2007 — a year after giant panda Mei Lan was born — and estimates about 720,000 this year.

As requested by community leaders, none of the buildings would be constructed higher than the trees, Torre said. There also would be a new amphibian and reptile complex to replace the aging structure built in the 1960s.

A controversial parking facility was not discussed, though Kelly did not seem to entirely rule it out.

"We will address parking. That is a complex problem. We don't want people parking in your driveway," he said.

"I think it's pretty cool," said City Councilwoman Carla Smith, whose district includes the zoo.

Phred Huber, parks and recreation chairwoman for the Grant Park Neighborhood Association, was excited by the changes.

"I think it's fantastic. Finally my friends from San Francisco will have a reason to visit Atlanta," she said, explaining that Atlanta's zoo will be far better than that in the City by the Bay.

She was especially pleased that the zoo was including green thinking in the design, including ways to capture and retain rain water.

Mark Turcotte, president of the South Atlantans for Neighborhood Development, said the way the zoo has approached the redesign from working with the community to being forward-thinking could set a precedent for others in the Atlanta to follow.

"I only wish that the same world-class vision the city has was shared by the city," he said.

Rick Hudson, the land use zoning chairman for the Grant Park Neighborhood Association, was impressed that zoo officials were able to do so much within its established footprint and is optimistic residents will be impressed. He thinks if the design is realized, it would make Zoo Atlanta the pre-eminent zoo "that it should be."

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