

## THE SAN DIEGO ZOO AND ITS CURRENT PLANS FOR EXPANSION

by  
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After a year of review by a panel appointed by the City of San Diego consisting of representatives of neighborhood and veterans groups, delegates from city committees, and city staff, the San Diego Zoo on May 17, 2001 made public a plan for expansion prepared by landscape architect Steve Estrada. Estrada had been a critic of the zoo's plan to expand into the area occupied by a nondescript building set aside as a Veterans War Memorial Building.

San Diego veterans were never in charge of the building and it was used for a variety of civic purposes that had nothing to do with the functions of veterans' groups. A committee organized to fight the zoo's suggested plans appointed an architectural historian to file an application to get the Veterans Memorial Building listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The zoo said nothing while this application was being processed and the building quickly passed pro forma screenings in historical preservation departments in Sacramento and Washington, D.C. and is now listed on the National Register despite its humdrum appearance; thus showing once again how an Iron Triangle composed of preservation amateurs, people who make money off preservation and government bureaucracies work. The review process does not solicit or listen to contradictory views.. When this writer wrote to Sacramento giving the history of the building and his knowledge of the architect who designed the building, he was not granted the courtesy of a response.

By hiring Estrada to create its plan for expansion, the zoo cleverly co-opted its most outspoken professional critic. As it is next to impossible in San Diego to get other professional landscape architects or architects to criticize the work of one of their peers and as the Parks and Recreation Design Review Committee is composed of the very people who profit from contracts to design and to build features in the parks of San Diego, dissenting critical professional judgment is stilled. With the loss of a San Diego edition of the **Los Angeles Times**, the only possibility that Estrada's plan will be evaluated rests with newspaper reporters on the **San Diego Union-Tribune**. These people can write stories based on interviews and published reports, but they are incompetent or unwilling to disclose the weaknesses in plans by landscape architects and architects. The result is that poorly conceived plans may blemish the city's premium park.

Estrada's plan would allow the Zoo to expand into most of its existing parking lot. He does not ask why the Zoo must expand or what it proposes to put in the lot. When the time comes to finalize this project, this will mean a commission for another landscape architect. The area around the Veterans War Memorial is cordoned off so that the users of the building will be able to park in a segment of the parking lot to the south now used by the Zoo and visitors to the War Memorial Building. There will be no parking in front of the building or in open space to the north.

The plan calls for a double row of trees to extend the length of Park Boulevard from the lawn to the north of the War Memorial Building to a short distance beyond the rose garden to the south. The trees on the east side of Park Boulevard will close off a panoramic view of the mountains that is one of the distinguishing features of Balboa Park that was much admired by Samuel Parsons, Jr., the park's first landscape architect. But then Parsons knew how to create picturesque and pastoral landscapes on a grand scale and not the small-scale pieces most landscape architects today design. Trees on the west side of the Boulevard do have the merit of hiding the threadbare War Memorial Building. Trees and a landscaped fringe on the west side will also screen whatever the zoo decides to put in its parking lot and will allow room for a walkway and a miniature train.

Entrance to the train will be at the north end of a large underground parking structure with the walkway continuing above along the west side of Park Boulevard until it ends at the Plaza de Balboa. Supposedly,

this walkway will provide pedestrians who live north of Upas Street access to the Zoo and El Prado. A number of these pedestrians will be teen-agers who attend Roosevelt Junior High School.

The underground parking structure will have a polygonal shape, part rectangle, part oblique angle and part an attenuated strip that will end at the north end of Plaza de Balboa. The entry for automobiles will stay as it is so that automobiles funneling from Zoo Drive and Florida Canyon will be able to enter by going across Park Boulevard, automobiles heading south will be able to turn right, and automobiles heading north will be able to turn left. Traffic signals will control this turning.

The main entrance will lead to an underground parking garage in four levels. It is not clear if the four levels pertain just to the rectangular north section or to the slanting south section and panhandle. The layout will provide spaces for 4,725 cars, which it is claimed will provide sufficient parking for visitors to the zoo with a surplus for visitors to adjacent areas of the park. Linscott, Law & Green, Engineers, claim the zoo's existing parking lot provides spaces for 2,780 cars. According to Estrada, the northern section of the garage will contain about 4,100 spaces or a net gain for the zoo of 1,320 spaces. The same Engineers give 420 spaces as the combined total for existing parking lots in the southern extension. Estrada predicts this section will contain 545 spaces, or a gain of 125 spaces, thus making a grand total of 2,445 new parking spaces in all sections of the underground parking garage(s). Needless to say the Park Department must be called upon to confirm space figures for existing and projected parking as those given by Linscott, Law & Green and by Estrada differ from previously published figures (3,500 for zoo parking lot alone)..

It will be possible for automobiles to enter the road south of Spanish Village, where a road now exists. Part of this road will be an underpass that presumably does not provide access to underground parking in the panhandle. However access is provided for taxis, shuttles and buses in a separate underground parking structure at the southern end of the panhandle. It is not clear how public transit vehicles heading north are to make this turn or how circulation is to be managed in the irregularly shaped garage or if, except for the transportation center, there is to be a demarcation between users of the zoo and users of the park. It is conjectured that parking spaces for the park proper will increase during nighttime hours when most zoo visitors move from their lots. While the entire parking garage is supposed to be underground, it is not clear if this will be so because of a drop in elevation from the zoo to El Prado.

About one half of the surface of the north parking lot will become part of the zoo and one-half will be landscaped and will be outside the zoo boundary. This is assuming that all the land contemplated for the changes is not given to the Zoo. The plan calls for a restaurant on top of the parking garage and the relocation of the existing carousel to an area to the south and east of Spanish Village. The miniature train is to be relocated as indicated in the landscaped border between the zoo and Park Boulevard.

The locations of the carousel and miniature train and presumably the objects themselves are listed as part of a Balboa Park National Historic Landmark. Since Estrada does not foresee difficulty in getting the Park Service of the Department of the Interior to modify the historic landmark status of these features even though such a change would violate the standards of historic preservation promulgated by the Historic Preservation Division of the Department of the Interior, it is planned to move these features. It is no doubt hoped that everyone in San Diego and Washington will look the other way when the deed is done. Estrada claims the existing tracks of the miniature train are no longer adequate and will have to be replaced. It is possible that both the train and carousel are in such poor condition that they too will have to be repaired or replaced. A train next to the pedestrian walkway could transport pedestrians, but to do it, it would have to be a different train as the existing train is adaptable to the size of children rather than the size of adults. Prototypes for small passenger trains exist in trains at the Stanley Park, Forest Park and Fort Worth Zoos.

To provide for access to the zoo and park for people arriving by bus, Estrada would put a pedestrian bridge across Park Boulevard in line with the north facade of the Natural History Museum, leading from bus stops on both sides of Park Boulevard to another cross walkway above the underground garage. This

would entail the destruction of the existing pedestrian bridge leading from El Prado to the Rose Garden. Such destruction would require the re-writing of the East Mesa Precise Plan approved by the City in 1992.

In a oral presentation of his plan, May 17, 2001, Estrada made much of the fact that the existing Moreton Bay fig tree between the Natural History Museum and Spanish Village would not be disturbed by the new east-west transverse walkway. He should know that this tree is nearing the end of its life and, in a few years, will no longer exist.. His plan envisions three circular plazas on the north-south walkway in line with the existing fountain in the Plaza de Balboa. There would be ornamental features in the center of these plazas, either sculpture or fountains or both.

While not part of the zoo's plan for expansion, Estrada also thinks an underground parking structure should be built south of the organ pavilion, which project is part of the Balboa Park Central Precise Plan drawn up by Estrada and approved by the City in 1992.

There are many parts of this plan which call for elaboration. Presumably this is going to be done in the next few months when the plan is passed along to city departments, is discussed in forums, is scrutinized in an Environmental Impact Report, is modified and re-modified, and is sent to the San Diego City Council for approval or rejection.

While this writer is sure many criticisms are going to be presented, he offers the following as the basis for further discussion. The criticisms are listed in order of importance as seen by the writer.

1. Who is going to pay the at-present estimated \$95 million for the underground parking structure?
2. Will it be a revenue-producing facility?
3. Does this mean that all parking in the park adjoining Park Boulevard and El Prado will be subject to parking fees to deter people from searching for free parking, thus creating bottlenecks?
4. Who is going to get the revenue from parking . . . the City, the Park Department or the San Diego Zoo?
5. What is the priority in construction; that is, how is it being staged?
6. Are the carousel and train to remain park attractions controlled by concessionaires other than the San Diego Zoo or is the Zoo to take them over, thus putting the Zoo into the entertainment business?.
7. Many Zoos in the country are limiting their exhibits. With all the attention being given to bio-climatic zones, such zoos show animals that live or survive in regions where this is possible and not in artificially created environments. Why must the San Diego Zoo try to reach a level where it has everything for everybody?
8. As a follow up to the above, what is going into the next exhibit area? Why is it necessary? Why can't it be placed somewhere else? Is there a likelihood that, far from promoting conservation of endangered species, the newly opened area will become an entertainment, theme-park facility comparable to Fort Worth's "Texas Wild"?
9. Beyond the obvious dangers of security and traffic entanglements, what are the drawbacks of underground parking in terms of noise and pollution from car exhausts?
10. How effectively are the garages going to be concealed?
11. Will the garages be energy efficient? If not, will the cost of upkeep be an ongoing mounting expense?

12. Since the organ pavilion parking lot has been proposed long before the zoo as necessary to alleviate congestion in El Prado/Palisades should it not have priority over the zoo's plans?.
13. Is the bus area south of the Veterans War Memorial Building for the Memorial Building or the zoo? (A recent release indicated this bus area is intended for patrons of the zoo, thus making necessary the construction of a secondary entrance.)
14. Why put the education center at the south end of a bus area adjoining the Veterans Memorial Building unless it is intended to provide access and egress from the parking lot in that area? If the education center is to be a climatic feature as it is in Forest Park, Saint Louis, it should be placed in a commanding rather than an out-of-the-way location.
15. Would it not be better to locate the Education Center at the main entrance?
16. What can be grown on top of a parking garage and how much soil is needed?
17. How much of the cactus garden, rose garden and Florida Canyon are impacted by the plan?
18. Why are southbound and northbound bus stops so far away from the main entrance to the zoo?
19. What adaptations have been made for the handicapped?
20. Has the National Park Service agreed to change the boundary of the National Historic Landmark in Balboa Park to accommodate the proposed changes?
21. Do any of the contemplated changes require a vote of the people as per the City Charter?
22. Since the Spanish Village will have to be rebuilt, does this in any way affect the zoo's plans?

As I have not seen the full documentation, it is possible some of my questions have been addressed or that I have misunderstood aspects of the plan because the data available to me has been inadequate. In any event answers to the above questions would be of benefit to me and, I am sure, to the people of San Diego.

May 18, 2001