

Reimagining Zoo New York: A Proposal for a Nature, Education and Community Center at Thompson Park



By Mayor Sarah V.C. Pierce

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Dear City Council Members and Residents:

First and foremost, I want to express my sincere gratitude to the employees, board members, and volunteers of Zoo New York. Your dedication, passion, and tireless efforts over the years have kept the zoo open and active despite financial headwinds. We recognize the challenges you've faced and the hard work that has gone into sustaining this important community institution. It has not gone unnoticed, and on behalf of the City, thank you. We hope you will continue to play an important role in the next chapter of this space, should the Council choose to pursue a new direction.

As we continue budget deliberations for the upcoming fiscal year, it is essential that we balance the desire to maintain valued community assets with the fiscal responsibility owed to Watertown taxpayers. Last year, the City made the difficult but necessary decision to provide a one-time infusion of funds to keep Zoo New York afloat. This commitment was made with the hope that the Zoo's leadership, in partnership with other governmental and private stakeholders, could build a sustainable path forward.

However, the Zoo's financial plan moving forward depends on \$375,000 in annual support from the City of Watertown, with an escalating amount in future years, in addition to the in-kind services the City provides. Given our overall financial outlook, recent spending decisions and competing priorities, it is an amount that, in my opinion, we simply cannot afford to provide on a recurring basis without placing an unsustainable burden on local taxpayers. Compounding this, the Zoo's proposal for long-term viability was also contingent on increased support from Jefferson County. The County has, unfortunately, declined to provide this support.

Given these factors, it is time for us to consider a more fiscally sustainable model, which provides opportunities for environmental education, conservation, and family-friendly recreation, while staying within the City's financial means. To that end, I am proposing that the City explore the possibility of bringing the Zoo property back under municipal control and transitioning it to a smaller-scale nature and education center, modeled on successful examples such as the Minna Anthony Common Nature Center on Wellesley Island, the Nicandri Nature Center in Massena, the Beaver Lake Nature Center in Baldwinsville, Albany Pine Bush Preserve and Discovery Center and a number of others.

In the pages ahead, I've shared several initial ideas for what different aspects of the space currently occupied by Zoo New York could become. Please note these are early, conceptual thoughts meant to spark dialogue, not final plans. They are starting points for discussion, with the goal of inviting community input to help shape a shared vision for the future of this unique and valuable property.

This vision would preserve the spirit of the Zoo, offering children and families a place to connect with nature, learn about our environment, and enjoy quality outdoor experiences, while also ensuring financial responsibility and long-term sustainability. Thank you for taking the time to review this proposal. I look forward to working together with the City Council, our residents, and current Zoo stakeholders as we consider the best path forward for our community.

Sincerely,

Sarah V.C. Pierce
City of Watertown Mayor

FUNDING

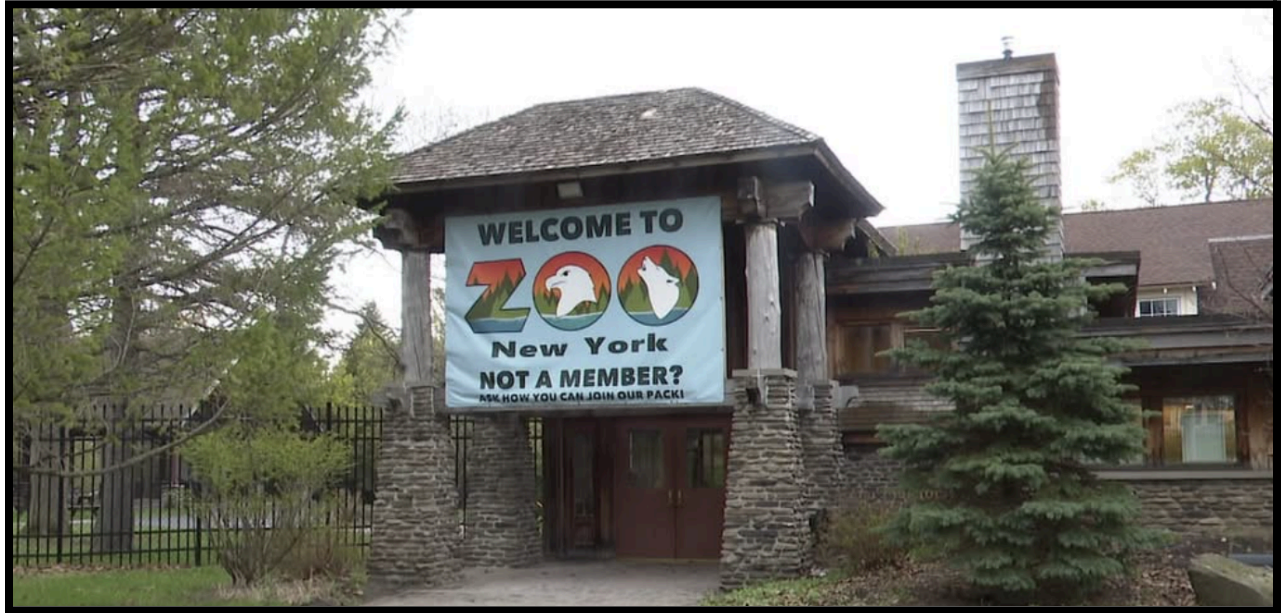
I fully recognize that pursuing a more fiscally sustainable model for the property currently inhabited by Zoo New York will not come without a cost. While there would be a one-time expense associated with dismantling certain exhibits and transitioning the space, the ongoing annual expenses under this new model would be a fraction of what the City is being asked to allocate each year to support Zoo New York. By scaling operations appropriately and focusing on low-maintenance, high-impact offerings, we can dramatically reduce the financial burden on taxpayers. To provide robust programming and community events, the City, ideally, would partner closely with a nonprofit “Friends” board, which would play a vital role in fundraising, volunteer coordination, and public engagement. Furthermore, this new vision opens the door for us to pursue outside funding from New York State, the federal government and other sources by presenting a clear, financially responsible plan focused on education, conservation, and public access.

STRUCTURE

Much like the Minna Anthony Common Nature Center and the Flower Memorial Library, this new operation could be supported by a nonprofit “Friends” group dedicated to its mission. Watertown is fortunate to already have a Friends of Thompson Park organization in place, and they could play a central role in this transition. Alternatively, if the current Zoo New York Board wishes to remain involved, their experience and passion for the space would also be welcome. Regardless of structure, this group could be tasked with overseeing events, coordinating educational programming, and helping to build public engagement.

Importantly, the Friends group could also take responsibility for raising supplemental monies through fundraisers, educational programming fees, grants, and donations. They would work closely in partnership with the City, which would continue to own and maintain the property. A designated representative from the City would serve on the board to ensure alignment with public goals and accountability. This collaborative governance model could help ensure that the revitalized space remains community-centered, financially sustainable, and mission-driven for years to come.

MAIN BUILDING



One of the most versatile assets on property currently inhabited by Zoo New York is the main building, which holds great potential for repurposing in a way that benefits both Thompson Park and the broader community. As part of the transition, this space could be reimagined as the Thompson Park Welcome and Conservancy Center—a central hub serving as the official gateway to our historic park.

This facility could function as a starting point for visitors, offering maps, trail information, and details about park amenities such as the playground, splash pad, pool, trails and other features. Inside, interpretive displays could showcase the rich history and legacy of Thompson Park, while a sitting area could provide a place for families and individuals to relax and connect. A small snack bar with light food options, beverages, and locally themed merchandise could help support operations and create a more welcoming experience.

Importantly, the center would remain free to enter, with a clearly designated area where visitors could make voluntary donations to support a potential nonprofit organization partnering with the City in managing the space.

ENHANCED OUTDOOR RECREATION

Another exciting opportunity lies in enhancing outdoor recreation within the current Zoo New York grounds. In addition to the existing playground, Zoo New York recently announced a generous donation to help fund the creation of a “nature playscape,” a nature-based play area designed to foster creativity, exploration, and physical activity.



As the mother of a young child, I know firsthand how much our community needs more safe and engaging spaces like this that are built with kids and families in mind. The City could play an important role in helping bring this vision to life, ensuring that the playscape becomes a lasting feature of the park. Combined with the paved trail network already in place within the zoo grounds, this would significantly expand recreational access. By removing or modifying existing fencing, these trails could be opened up to the public for free daily use, creating a welcoming environment for parents with strollers, individuals with disabilities, and anyone looking to enjoy a quiet walk in nature without barriers. This is a chance to make Thompson Park more inclusive, more active, and more accessible for everyone.



CONSERVATION CENTER



The building currently known as the Conservation Center also holds strong potential for continued use as an educational resource and attraction. If scaled down from its current form, this facility could still house educational exhibits and a collection of small animals such as turtles, fish, snakes, amphibians, and other creatures native to our region, providing children and families with up-close experiences that foster curiosity and respect for local wildlife. Maintaining this type of hands-on, nature-based learning opportunity would help preserve one of the most engaging and memorable



aspects of the current zoo, while keeping operational costs more manageable. The space could be curated in collaboration with naturalists, educators, or local partners, and designed to serve both casual visitors and school or group field trips. It would allow the new configuration of this property to retain an animal-focused educational component without requiring the staffing and infrastructure needed for larger or more resource-intensive species. In this way, the Conservation Building could remain a core part of the park's educational mission in a more focused, sustainable format.

Additionally, the "Butterfly House" could also be maintained as part of the future use of the site. Because of its smaller scope, it appears as though this attraction is more manageable from a resource and staffing perspective compared to larger animal enclosures. Yet, it could still offer an engaging educational experience for visitors.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING



Educational programming has long been at the heart of Zoo New York's mission, and many families have expressed a strong desire to see this continue in any future use of the space. A reimagined nature center could preserve and even expand on that mission by creating a dedicated framework for educational activities rooted in local ecology, conservation, and outdoor learning. As mentioned at the beginning of this document, one proven model worth considering is the formation of a "Friends" board, which could work in partnership with the City to plan and deliver year-round programming for children, families, and individuals of all ages.

This organization could offer a wide range of educational experiences—both free and fee-based—as a way to support operations and generate revenue. Examples of programming might include guided nature walks, wildlife identification workshops, birdwatching sessions, summer camps, seasonal events, and hands-on science and nature crafts. Much like the offerings at the Minna Anthony Common Nature Center on Wellesley Island, programs could be tailored to engage people at every age and ability level.

The classroom building currently located on the Zoo New York grounds would be well-suited to serve as a home base for these efforts, hosting indoor instruction, presentations, and inclement-weather activities. With the right leadership and community support, this space could become an active, vibrant center for environmental education, continuing a key part of the zoo's legacy while better aligning with the City's financial realities and long-term vision.

REVENUE GENERATION THROUGH RENTALS



With a new vision, the City can take proactive steps to generate sustainable revenue from the assets already in place at the current Zoo New York site. Several existing facilities within the grounds offer excellent opportunities for public rental and special-use arrangements. For example, the pavilion on-site could be made available for birthday parties, family gatherings, small weddings, and community events.

Portions of a potential future Thompson Park Welcome and Conservancy Center could also be designated as rentable space for meetings, small receptions, or workshops, particularly during off-peak hours or when not in use for educational programming. These rentals could provide a modest income stream to support ongoing operations.

Additionally, the residential-style house located on the property presents a unique and promising opportunity that is worth discussing. With some modest upgrades and proper management, the house could be offered as a short-term vacation rental, Airbnb-style, for families or visitors seeking a one-of-a-kind experience in our historic park. Guests could enjoy direct access to trails, natural features, and family-friendly attractions within walking distance, all while contributing to the financial sustainability of the site. This model has been successful in other municipal and state park systems, and it would allow Thompson Park to showcase its charm while supporting its future.

ADDITIONAL ENHANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES



Beyond what I've already outlined, there are numerous other opportunities to further enhance the space currently occupied by Zoo New York in ways that promote community engagement and sustainability. Portions of the property could be allocated for community gardens or a community greenhouse, encouraging hands-on learning, healthy living, and local food production.

The area that currently houses the children's petting zoo could also be retained and reimagined as a rotating farm animal exhibit, where local farms are invited to bring animals once or twice a month during the warmer seasons. This space could be leased to participating farms, which could then choose to charge a small admission fee, creating an enriching, family-friendly experience while supporting local agriculture and generating modest revenue for ongoing maintenance.

Additionally, as part of an effort to make Thompson Park more inclusive and accessible, we could also pursue the creation of a sensory trail, modeled after other similar trails that exist across the country, including one that was recently unveiled in nearby Natural Bridge. This would be a relatively low-cost addition that offers an engaging experience for individuals with sensory processing needs, including those on the autism spectrum, and their families. Ideally, we could seek to partner with Encompass Recreation, a local organization dedicated to inclusive sports and recreation, to help design and implement the project in a way that truly meets community needs.

NEXT STEPS

Despite the best efforts of staff, volunteers and the board, it is clear that the current model of operating Zoo New York is not financially sustainable, and continuing down this path would place an undue burden on Watertown taxpayers.

What I have laid out here is not a final plan, but a starting point for reimagining what this space could become—something educational and enjoyable for our community, but on a much smaller and more sustainable scale that reflects the fiscal realities we face.

Public feedback, as well as the feedback of Zoo New York and the Jefferson County Board of Legislators, will be essential in shaping any future use of the property, and I welcome that input wholeheartedly. Ultimately, it is incumbent upon the City Council to determine the direction we take. In my view, this proposal represents the most responsible, realistic, and community-centered path forward.

While change can be difficult, it also brings new opportunities. By working together, we can honor the spirit of Zoo New York while building a space that is financially sustainable, educationally rich, and welcoming to all. I look forward to shaping this future alongside the members of our community.