

August 30, 2006

Mayor John Cook
El Paso City Council
City Hall Office
2 Civic Center Plaza, 10th Floor
El Paso, Texas 79901

To Mayor Cook and El Paso City Council:

Once again, the City of El Paso finds itself the center of controversy for abuse of an elephant at its Zoo, reinforcing the Zoo's already bad reputation for elephant care.

At a time when the welfare of elephants in zoos is subject to intense national scrutiny, we are appalled to learn that a Zoo employee allegedly struck one of the elephants at the Zoo. It's just not right that an elephant should suffer at the hands of those who are charged with her care. Responsibility for this disturbing event goes beyond one individual's actions and falls squarely on the City of El Paso for allowing the abuse to occur.

What makes this development worse is that this is the second incident of elephant abuse, following the horrific 1999 beating of Sissy, which was captured on videotape. One has to wonder how many other times an elephant at the Zoo may have been abused and it went unnoticed or unreported.

The fact that El Paso Zoo has repeatedly failed to protect elephants from physical abuse is but one of the institutional failings of its elephant program. There are three important conditions elephants need to thrive in zoos: space, social constituency, and proper management. El Paso Zoo fails on all these accounts:

- The Zoo is incapable of providing the large space that elephants need for movement to maintain health and well-being.
- The Zoo does not meet Association of Zoos and Aquariums recommendations for number of female elephants.
- The Zoo has not protected the elephants in its care from physical abuse.

More than one year ago, El Paso City Council voted to make improvements to the Zoo's outdated elephant enclosure, rather than send Juno and Savannah to a sanctuary. To date, City Council has taken no significant action, despite very public and repeated reminders by local media.

Mayor John Cook, El Paso City Council

Alleged Abuse of Elephant at El Paso Zoo
August 30, 2006

When we met with each of you last year, we pointed out that providing the space and conditions consistent with elephant health and well-being comes at a high price. Considering the City's fiscal standing, which has been further strained by widespread weather-related damage to the city, it is obvious that the City of El Paso is unable to commit the resources needed to provide the highest quality of life for Juno and Savannah.

The only humane decision – the only right decision – is to close the elephant exhibit at El Paso Zoo and send Juno and Savannah to The Elephant Sanctuary in Hohenwald, Tenn., to join Sissy. There Juno and Savannah can live out their lives in the country's premier elephant facility, where, like Sissy, they will have the space and natural habitat necessary to thrive. By doing so, El Paso would join progressive cities like Detroit and San Francisco that closed their elephant exhibits because they realized they simply could not meet the elephants' needs.

The eyes of the country again will be on the City of El Paso and its handling of this shocking event. We urge the City to do the right thing, as was done for Sissy, and send Juno and Savannah to The Elephant Sanctuary immediately. Not only has Sissy healed in the Sanctuary's spacious and natural environment, she has flourished. Juno and Savannah deserve the same chance and nothing less.

Thank you for your serious attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Les Schobert

Catherine Doyle

cc: Joyce Wilson, City Manager