

This is that tragic day we knew would come.

This is that tragic day we have warned the zoo and city officials about for years.

This is that tragic day that could have been avoided had Gita been sent to the natural habitat of a sanctuary away from the concrete cramped quarters at the L.A. Zoo which have killed her.

Gita is the 13th elephant to die before her time at the L.A. Zoo. She was in her middle age at 48, not in her old age as the zoo wants us to believe. Elephants can live into their 70's in natural habitats. It is the unnatural condition of zoos that shortens their lives. The proposed 40 million dollar one-acre expansion of the L.A. Zoo's elephant exhibit is inadequate for the 8 to 10 elephants they propose to display there. Has the death of 13 elephants taught us nothing?

For years animal activists have brought forth expert testimony regarding the plight of elephants in zoos. Some zoos have closed their elephant exhibits and relocated their elephants to sanctuaries. But here in L.A., we have not evolved. Zoo director John Lewis, who has not had any previous experience with elephants, ignored our appeals. The Los Angeles city council, led by Councilman Tom LeBonge's showboating with his constant use of children as pawns in this debate, shares responsibility for Gita's needless death. The Zoo Commission itself, which only rubberstamps the director's wishes, sat idly by in useless silence, bears responsibility too. And Mayor Villaraigosa, despite his campaign promise to close the exhibit, bears responsibility by his cowardly betrayal of Gita, Ruby and Billy when he bowed out of the debate and passed the buck to the city council.

Again – you are all witness – we ask that the elephant exhibit be closed, that Ruby and Billy be sent to a sanctuary, that the L.A. Zoo join the 21st century in the proper disposition of elephants and that the death of Gita not be in vain.

I would like to ask for a moment of silence in honor of our beloved Gita.