

Updated FAQ Sheet: Knowland Park and the Oakland Zoo's Expansion Plan

Prepared by Friends of Knowland Park – September 2014

1. Where is Knowland Park?

Knowland Park is a 400+ acre tract of natural parkland in East Oakland. Bordered by the Oakland Zoo to the west and Skyline Boulevard to the east, it provides a corridor of high quality native habitat stretching from its western ridge to undeveloped water district land and Chabot Regional Park in the east. The Zoo sits on 100 acres along Interstate 580.

2. Who owns and maintains Knowland Park?

The City of Oakland owns it. It was deeded to the City by the state of California in 1975 on condition that it remain a public park forever. In 1982, the City hired the private nonprofit East Bay Zoological Society (EBZS) to operate the Oakland Zoo and maintain the park. The City has never monitored EBZS's care of the park. Past Zoo dumping of manure and trash has degraded native habitats and contributed to dispersal of invasive weeds. Citizens have organized their own work groups to remove invasive growth near rare habitats.

3. What are the Zoo's expansion plans in Knowland Park?

Current plans involve taking 77 acres of the park's western ridge far above the Zoo to build a 56-acre development. The project calls for an 8-foot chain-link perimeter fence topped with 3 feet of barbed wire, expanded and paved access roads, and over 50 structures, including a 3-story visitor center, high-end restaurant, offices, interpretive center, paved walkways, 15-car gondola with 7 towers up to 68-feet high, and 100+ person overnight camp compound. Parking needs for a projected increase in visitors have not been addressed.

4. What impacts would the Zoo's ridge expansion have on this public park?

The public would lose 77 acres of natural public park land. The public now has unimpeded, free access to this natural open space, with trails leading up to panoramic views of the Bay Area and winding through stands of native grasslands, oak woodlands, coastal scrub and maritime chaparral. The project involves levelling the hilltops to pave and build on these lands, permanently barring the public from 52 acres and charging Zoo admission for the views. The one viewpoint left outside the project area will be boxed in by a residential area on one side and the Zoo's barbed-wire-topped perimeter fence on the other.

This expansion would harm the most valuable natural habitats in the park. The ridge project would destroy and degrade pristine stands of rare maritime chaparral and native grasses, destroy over 50 mature trees including heritage oaks, and fence out native wildlife that depends on this land to survive. The western highlands host a rich collection of thriving native plants and animals—interconnected ecosystems of grasslands, oak woodlands, coastal scrub and chaparral with spectacular native plant and wildlife diversity: lichens, mosses, fungi, wildflowers, shrubs and trees; insects, reptiles (including Alameda whipsnake, listed as a threatened species by state and federal agencies), resident and migratory birds, and an array of mammals, from the dusky-footed woodrat (a California species of special concern) to the top of the food chain, our native mountain lion.

Not one East Bay conservation organization has endorsed this project.

5. Why did the Zoo choose the ridge site for its expansion?

Zoo management has never answered this question, other than stating a preference for great views and natural surroundings to suggest a theme of California as it existed long ago. In contrast to the Zoo's stated conservation mission, its choice of the ridge site requires destruction of the very California native wildlife habitat it plans to feature in the man-made exhibits.

6. Is this the only site available for a Zoo expansion?

No, ample land is available for expansion within and near the existing Zoo footprint. Using this land would avoid destruction of sensitive habitat, and would be less expensive to build and maintain.

7. If the expansion is so ecologically destructive, why haven't regulatory agencies stopped it?

Regulatory review is designed to raise red flags about potential environmental issues in early planning stages. If there will be significant environmental impacts, an Alternatives Analysis is required to find less destructive options. EBZS avoided this requirement by convincing the City to accept its claim in 1996 that its expansion plans in Knowland Park would not have significant environmental impacts. The City never examined that issue, even as EBZS made major changes over time—moving the project up on the ridge and dramatically increasing its size and cost. With an Alternatives Analysis, it is unlikely that EBZS would have been able to proceed with plans to build on the ridge. EBZS also failed to provide agencies with sufficient facts to review the ridge project until 2013, two years after the City Council voted to approve it. The agencies have now determined that the project will involve impacts sufficient to require setting aside 52+ acres of land to make up for destruction of habitat on-site. The choice of site and the delay in disclosing crucial information about the project has created the problems Zoo management and the City face now.

8. Why has the City been willing to give public parkland to the Zoo for development?

In 1975, the City may not have recognized this parkland as a valuable natural resource. In the last few years, urban communities have recognized the importance of preserving remaining wildlands, but Knowland Park has been left out—hidden in the Zoo's shadow. The public benefits it offers to Bay Area residents have been ignored, and instead of promoting the park, EBZS has focused on using it for its own purposes. It would be a tragedy for the City to keep its eyes squeezed shut, and let the most valuable part of this park—to wildlife and to the public—be destroyed forever.

9. What would the costs of the expansion be for Oakland and its residents?

Zoo developers have argued that the costs to the City will be more than recovered by the financial benefits it will bring to Oakland, but they offer nothing to prove this is true: there is no financial accountability for this project (annual reports missing; no financial feasibility study or capital spending report). Taxpayers already support Zoo operations and, as often happens with "good for Oakland" development projects, that burden would increase with long-term debt associated with the costs of operating and maintaining a luxury development, and the increased traffic and pollution it will bring. These financial and quality-of-life impacts are not justified by an unnecessary development project.

10. Why didn't the defeat of the 2012 Zoo county parcel tax Measure A1 stop the expansion?

The loss of a guaranteed \$125 million in public funds over 25 years was a big blow but it did not stop Zoo management's focus on expansion. EBZS is now scrambling for financing for construction costs, including taking out a \$10 million bridge loan and moving money out of operations and into capital development, leaving existing exhibits in disrepair and deferring staff salary increases.

11. What is the status of the Zoo's expansion plan now?

EBZS does not have all the financing it needs to build and operate the project, and it is still waiting for permits to begin construction. As a result of the agency finding of significant destruction of habitat, permits will only be granted on condition that EBZS meet the 52-acre mitigation requirement. EBZS will be asking the City Council to approve using Knowland Park land to meet that obligation. Approval would mean making what is now free-access public parkland permanently off-limits to the public. Information about public hearings before a City Council vote has been unavailable. The lack of transparency in this process is part of the problem—the public has been effectively squeezed out.

12. What do Knowland Park supporters want?

We are working for a better, more broadly acceptable alternative to the Zoo's unacceptable choice to build on valuable public parkland. Fortunately, there are options that would both support a Zoo expansion and preserve public access and wildlife habitat in Knowland Park. We hope the City Council will press the Zoo to commit to a progressive conservation program that includes preserving, rather than destroying, nearby natural lands to teach authentic conservation to Zoo visitors.

Join us, and speak out! For more information, go to www.saveknowland.org