

John Ball Zoo plans more exhibits, redesign

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By Barton Deiters

July 10,
2019

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (WOOD) — John Ball Zoo is proposing a makeover that would include not only new animals and exhibits, but also a new experience for visitors.

John Ball Zoo draws some 500,000 people each year. It opened 128 years ago, which makes it nation's 10th oldest zoo. Next month marks the 15 years since Kent County voters rejected zoo officials' request to move away from the West Side and to the suburbs. Now, the man who oversees the zoo says it's home is the perfect spot.

"I can't tell you how pleased I am that the zoo's here," CEO Peter D'Arienzo said Tuesday.

The zoo recently added **toucans**, an additional spider monkey, and the popular **red pandas**, which zoo officials are hoping make a love connection.

"We're hoping they'll get together and produce offspring," D'Arienzo said. "So we built a bridal suite and they're getting to know each other."

Over the next five years, the zoo will look different. To get that process started, it will close early this season.

"We're closing a month early because we have only so much time we can work in the winter," the CEO explained.

Step one: Widen the entryway to address accessibility. The hill that greets people after they pay admission will be half as steep.

"The zoo, to be a community treasure, really needs to be a community treasure for all," D'Arienzo said. "It's a lot more than just being (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliant, it's about being a zoo for all. If I walked up that hill right now, maybe I'm not in great shape, but if I'm talking, I get out of breath."

Officials are also planning an 18-acre playground for the neighborhood. To do it, they'll move parking from in front of the zoo to the rear.

"You don't get in the car and Saturday and go, 'Let's go visit the parking lot,'" D'Arienzo said.

There will also be changes to the fountain at the entrance to separate it from traffic.

And every year, new exhibits will roll out.

“We’re adding a giant anteater, which isn’t on exhibit yet — maybe about a month or so,” D’Arienzo said.

John Ball Zoo is among only 10% of zoos in the country certified to have the best possible practices for meeting animals’ needs. It said the changes will allow it to keep treating animals the best it can.

The long-term plans will rely on donations, so the zoo will be making more announcements about fundraising.