



ELK GROVE NEWS

## How Elk Grove is trying to land a Sacramento landmark to build the ‘future of zoos’

Cheetah brothers Rowdy and Zig Zag, who are on exhibit at The Sacramento Zoo, are seen through the glass viewing area at the new exhibit in April. JASON PIERCE *SACRAMENTO BEE FILE*

**BY DARRELL SMITH**

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## Move the zoo to Elk Grove?

The city of Elk Grove envisions building a modern, regional Sacramento Zoo from scratch — the nation's first new zoo since the Indianapolis Zoo in 1988, said a key consultant on the project.

**EXPAND ALL**

The 60 acres at the southeast end of Elk Grove are bare now. But the real estate at Lotz Parkway and Kammerer Road potentially represents both a new chapter for a Sacramento landmark and a turning point for a city aspiring to become a regional destination.

Here, the city of [Elk Grove envisions building a modern, regional Sacramento Zoo](#) from scratch — the nation's first new zoo since the Indianapolis Zoo in 1988, more than 30 years ago, said a key consultant on the project.

 This story is a subscriber exclusive

“It’s not too often that you get to do that. That’s what makes this special,” said Rick Biddle, managing partner of [zoo and aquarium relocation consulting firm Relevant Strategies and Solutions](#). “This is a lifetime opportunity, for the animals, and for the city of Elk Grove.”

A draft of some plans will land this month. Biddle’s firm is at work on a feasibility study that will be a road map.

As Darrell Doan, Elk Grove’s economic development director, said: “We have a lot to learn.”

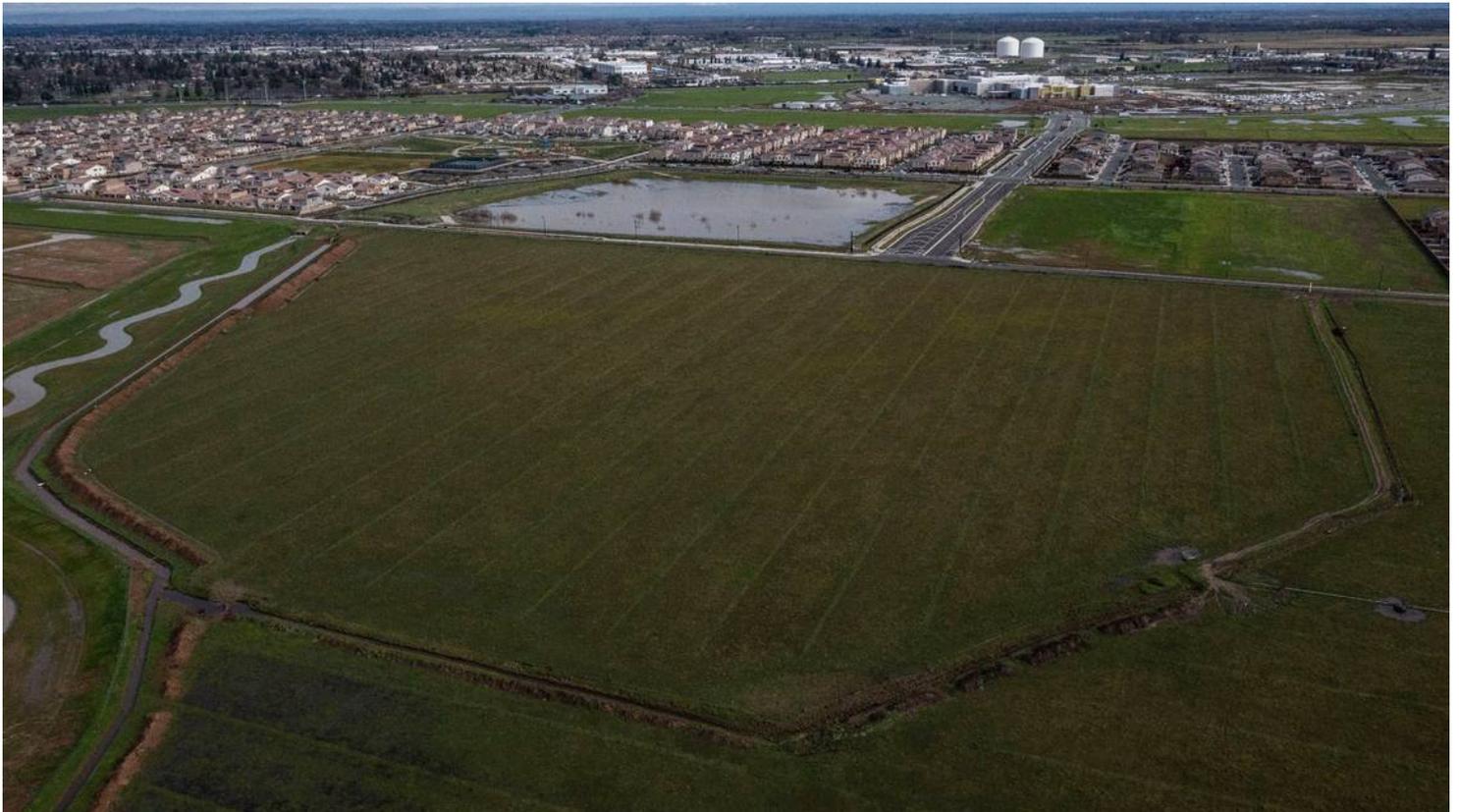
## A MATTER OF SURVIVAL

The move is also a matter of survival for an aged, landlocked Sacramento Zoo that has lost many of its iconic species over the decades, sought a new location for nearly as long, and is in danger of losing its accreditation. In April, Sacramento Zoo Executive Director Jason Jacobs laid out the scenario in stark terms before a Sacramento city committee.

“We have had to in the last 25 years send out our bears, gorillas, hippos and elephants. And when you dwindle that away, you limit the ability to increase your revenue or attendance,” Jacobs told a city of Sacramento investment committee.

“If we continue on our path,” Jacobs added, “we are managing toward extinction.”

Elk Grove quickly jumped in with a plan for 60 acres of undeveloped land that would more than triple the size of the zoo’s cramped Land Park footprint and by September had secured an exclusive six-month negotiating agreement with the Sacramento Zoological Society.



An aerial view shows the proposed Elk Grove site for the Sacramento Zoo in the foreground in December, with newly constructed Lotz Parkway crossing the middle of the image. New homes and the under construction Sky River Casino are visible in the distance. The zoo would be accessed from Highway 99 via Kammerer Road. Hector Amezcua [HAMEZCUA@SACBEE.COM](mailto:HAMEZCUA@SACBEE.COM)

The proposed site in an area planners carved out two decades ago for the city's last large-scale urban development is the reason “why we can put the zoo where we can put it,” Doan told The Bee in an earlier interview. The prospect thrills consultant Biddle.

“What I’m impressed about is the zoo is going to have this urban feel. It’s not there yet, but in 10 years, it will be surrounded by the community,” Biddle said. “To be able to walk to the zoo — that’s the future of zoos. The community that’s being built there, that’s how the zoo becomes special.”

Recently, the zoo had eyed the expansive opportunities in North Natomas, where the vacant Sleep Train Arena sits about nine miles north. But the city delayed a vote on the project in December 2020 and since then a hospital has been designated for the Sleep Train site. Other locations have also been considered.

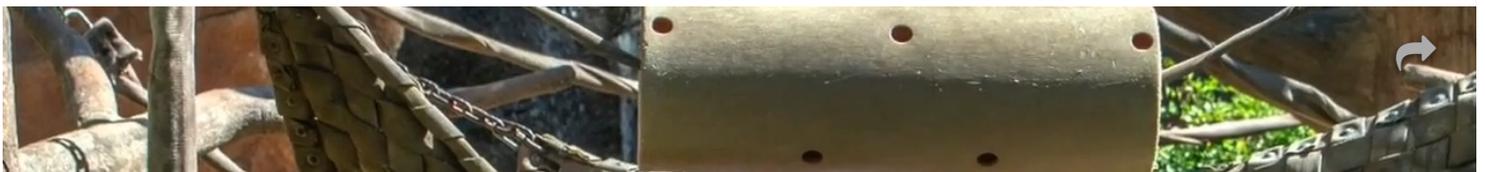
The September pact prompted the city to return to evaluating sites and at a recent Sacramento City Council meeting to renew its interest in keeping the zoo. Still, Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg said then, “I’m a regionalist and not everything is about borders. I know we fight for the city and we always do, but Elk Grove is not our rival here.”

Cost is an issue. Sacramento officials estimate at least \$50 million in city funds for an initial relocation phase would need to be spent even after the zoo’s fundraising efforts. Meanwhile, plans to build more affordable housing in the city or revitalize Sacramento’s riverfront wait.

## **BETTER FOR ENTERTAINMENT**

Meanwhile, Elk Grove and Sacramento Zoo officials plow ahead with figuring how a regional zoo in the south end of the county could become reality.

Zoo officials hired Relevant Strategies to look at how and where animals will be housed, along with project and operations costs, revenue sources, fundraising and city contributions among other issues.





New Sacramento Zoo Director Jason Jacobs takes The Bee through the zoo and explains his goal of moving the zoo from William Land Park to a new, larger site in an exclusive interview on Tuesday, Oct. 2, 2018.

BY **RENÉE C. BYER** ✉

A draft of the study laying out the zoo project's vision and why the zoo was proposed for Elk Grove could be ready by the end of January, said Christopher Jordan, Elk Grove's strategic planning director.

The New Jersey firm has a deep portfolio and knows the Sacramento Zoo's relocation efforts well. It's worked with roughly half of the country's 220 accredited zoos, [including sites in Baton Rouge, Norfolk, Va., and Tucson](#); as well as the City of Sacramento for nearly a decade as the capital city worked to find a new zoo site including potential spots Sutter's Landing, North Natomas and Sleep Train Arena.

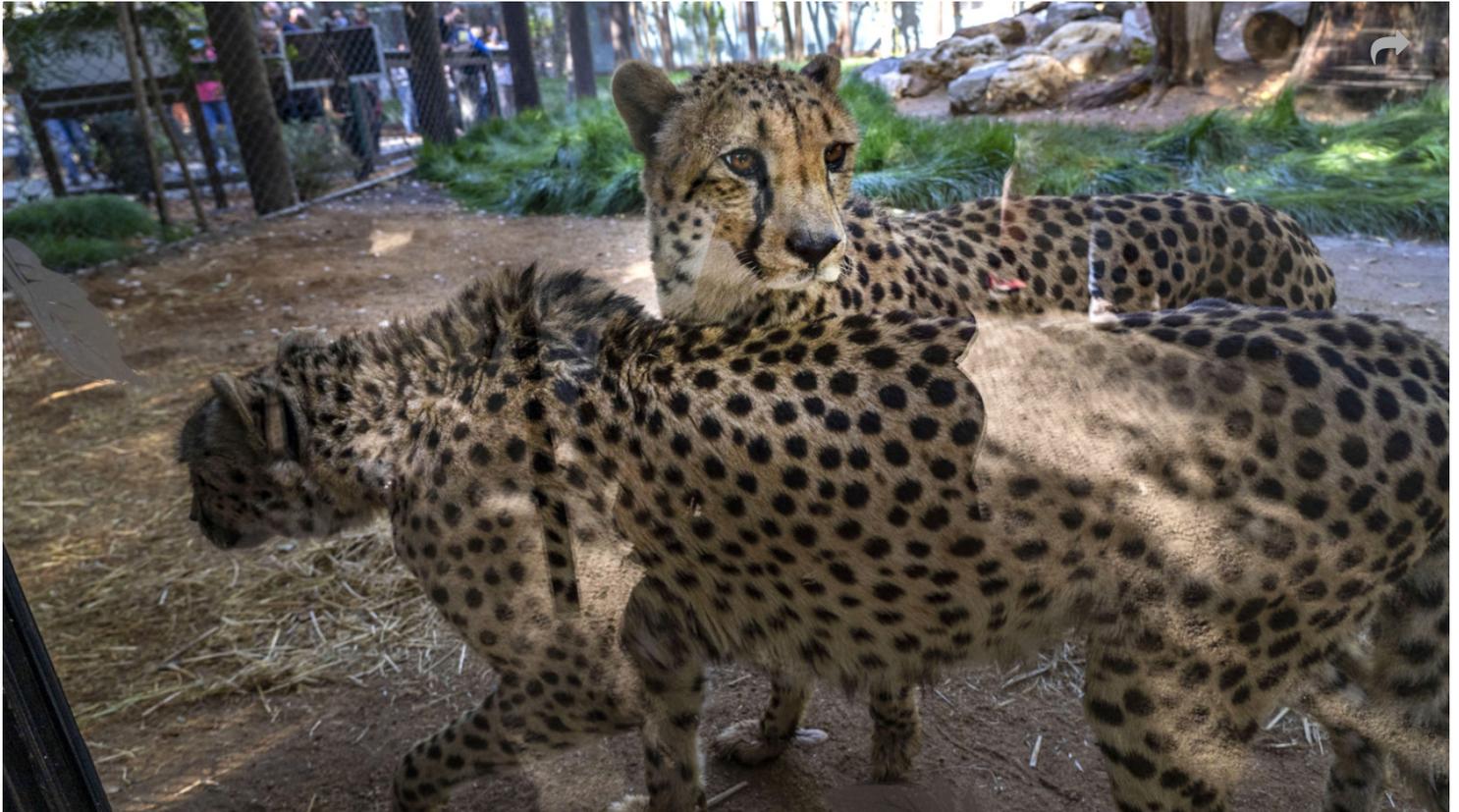
"We're looking to complete the feasibility study in mid-March," Biddle said. That is about the same time Elk Grove's negotiating agreement with the Sacramento Zoological Society ends.

Elk Grove residents will later have a chance to weigh in on the city's zoo plan, how much it will cost and what Doan called other "high-level details."

"We're very confident we can meet that schedule. We'll look at a couple of key elements," Biddle continued. "We worked with Jason (Elk Grove city manager

Jason Behrmann) and his team on a vision that was more expansive, that had a bigger platform, a bigger space. It's a great site and location.”

Elk Grove is also banking on the zoo to become a regional destination and economic driver. The city projects a relocated Sacramento Zoo could draw as many as 1 million visitors a year and put about 250 people to work.



The Sacramento Zoo introduced its newest exhibit Friday, April 23, 2021, a pair of cheetah brothers, Rowdy and Zig Zag. The pair arrived from Wildlife Safari in Oregon on April 11 and are the first cheetahs at the Sacramento Zoo in nearly 20 years. BY **JASON PIERCE** ✉

“We’ve already created a city as a place to live. People come here for the parks and the schools and the safety. We have great shopping.

Now the ‘play’ part — I’ve lived here 30 years and that’s been really challenging,” Elk Grove Mayor Bobbie Singh-Allen [told The Bee](#) in November. “The zoo has the potential now to be a destination with that as that pivotal point.”

The study’s analysis will also consider operations costs and revenue sources as well as visitors’ experience and animal safety — one of the primary reasons factoring into why Sacramento Zoo is considering a move south.

## BETTER FOR THE ANIMALS

Sacramento Zoo's aging habitats have jeopardized the Sacramento Zoo's continued accreditation with the [Association of Zoos & Aquariums](#) even as zoo officials sought a new site. After years of searching, the situation had become urgent, said zoo officials.

"We've known for some time that the current 14.7 acres is not enough to provide our animals with the level of care that's increasingly being expected to be an accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums," Elizabeth Stallard, president of the Sacramento Zoological Board of Trustees, [said in September](#) on the Capital Public Radio program "Insight."

A gibbon clings to the edge of his enclosure at the Sacramento Zoo on Tuesday, Oct. 2, 2018. Zoo director Jason Jacobs said the exhibit is one of many made in the 1960s that needs to be updated. Renée C. Byer  
*SACRAMENTO BEE FILE*

Sacramento Zoo officials [lay out their case](#) on the zoo's website. Extensive renovations are needed to bring habitats and other facilities to current standards. The landlocked Land Park site cannot be expanded to accommodate many of its animals and parking is at a premium.

"Over the past 30 years, the zoo has lost many of its iconic animal species due to space constraints, including tiger, hippopotamus, and bear," officials say on the website. "This decline will continue if the zoo stays where it is."

Sacramento Zoo Director Jason Jacobs renewed the call for a new zoo [in a Dec. 3 open letter](#) posted to the website: "Our region needs a new, expanded zoo that can increase its capacity to care for populations of rare species," the letter read in part.

Reintroducing those species will be an important part of a new and larger regional zoo in Elk Grove, Biddle said.

"We're looking to provide experiences that are unique and different. They wanted to have a savanna experience, mixed-species, with elements of California," Biddle said. "It will be a unique guest experience, bringing back the engagement of animals that have left Sacramento."



## See historic photos of the large animals the Sacramento Zoo once had

Sherri Pennington and her sister and brothers feed the elephants – a common practice at the time – at the Sacramento Zoo on Dec. 24, 1978. Because of the cramped and out-of-date enclosure, the zoo relocated its last elephant, Winky, to Detroit in 1991. Winky had been alone since her roommate Sue died in 1988.

FRANK STORK SACRAMENTO BEE FILE

Singh-Allen, talking with Capital Public Radio in September, stressed a new zoo's regional benefits.

“We have the space to accommodate the zoo's needs, and most importantly, the animals,” Elk Grove Mayor Bobbie Singh-Allen told Capital Public Radio's “Insight” in September. “With this 60-acre parcel, we can reaffirm our commitment not only to the animals, but to conservation and also as an educational hub.”

Meantime, Elk Grove continues its work. Singh-Allen and other city leaders recently traveled to Fresno Chaffee Zoo and Houston Zoo to survey those sites' layouts and bring home ideas. More fact-finding trips are planned, Doan said.

And Biddle said much more work lay ahead.

“How do we implement the vision at this site? How do we put together the funding model to make that work?” Biddle said. “We’re writing the book, but we’re not at the last chapter.”

Wildebeests graze in the savannah at the Fresno Chaffee Zoo’s 13-acre African Adventure exhibit in 2015, just before it was opened to the public. The \$56 million project is home about 100 animals – including lions, elephants, rhinos and cheetahs. Fenced grassy areas, dug below ground level to give the savannah an open feel, separate the more docile animals from predators. CRAIG KOHLRUSS *FRESNO BEE FILE*

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Darrell Smith covers courts and California news for The Sacramento Bee. He joined The Bee in 2006 and previously worked at newspapers in Palm Springs, Colorado Springs, Colo., and Marysville. A Sacramento Valley native, Smith was born and raised at Beale Air Force Base, near Marysville.

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