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ACCREDITATION

Accreditation as a Community Goal

How the City of Atascadero and the Central Coast Zoo Embarked on a Shared Mission of Excellence

By Jim Lewis, Dr. Cynthia Stringfield, and Terrie Banish

For government-operated institutions, Association of Zoos and Aquariums accreditation isn't just a professional benchmark—it's a reflection of shared priorities between a zoo and its community leadership. The story of the Central Coast Zoo (formerly the Charles Paddock Zoo) in Atascadero, Calif., is a testament to what's possible when accreditation becomes a community goal, not just an internal one.

Located in the heart of San Luis Obispo County, the Central Coast Zoo is a five-acre facility owned and operated by the City of Atascadero since 1979. It has maintained continuous AZA accreditation since 1991, completing the accreditation application process seven times. With a population of just over 30,000, Atascadero is a small but engaged community that deeply values its history, none more unique than its Zoo, which is also the only AZA-accredited facility within a 100-mile radius.

In 2023, as the Zoo approached its 2024 accreditation

application submittal, the city faced unexpected change. Longtime Zoo Director, Alan Baker, retired suddenly, leaving a leadership void just as the Zoo's strategic planning and accreditation preparations were ramping up. At the same time, AZA continued to promote positive change in accreditation standards with a solid focus on conservation, animal wellbeing, education, and sustainability.

City Manager Jim Lewis returned to Atascadero in 2023 and already knew the value the Zoo brought to the community, but the upcoming accreditation cycle required immediate action, cross-departmental coordination, and, most importantly, a strong new leader at the helm. He knew being AZA-accredited confirmed to the community that the Zoo met the gold standard, and, in turn, this would drive attendance, fundraising, and positive perception of the institution.

Recognizing the urgency, Lewis reassigned Terrie Banish,

the city's director of community services and promotions, to oversee the Zoo. With previous experience in the amusement park business, and a background in community engagement, marketing, and events, she was uniquely positioned to support the Zoo.

"Terrie and I knew that AZA accreditation couldn't be treated as a box to check," said Lewis. "It had to be a true and long-standing community commitment, backed by the city leadership at every level."

Together, they began the search for a new zoo director. They knew they needed to find someone who not only understood AZA excellence and the programs, policies, and procedures needed, but who could thrive within a city-run structure. That person was Dr. Cynthia Stringfield, who left her executive position at Zoo Tampa to take on the challenge.

Stringfield was drawn to the Zoo because she saw that "there was real commitment from the city—not just budgetary support, but a belief that the Zoo mattered, and that accreditation was a reflection of community values"—she knew that this provided a strong foundation for the Zoo's future success.

Crucial to the accomplishing this effort was the mutual trust between city leadership and the new zoo director. The city trusted Stringfield as the subject matter expert on Zoo operations and AZA standards, and she, in turn, trusted city leadership to navigate the complexities of government structure, funding, and public engagement.

City leaders didn't just offer support from afar; they immersed themselves in AZA and the accreditation process. Both Lewis and Banish attended the AZA Annual Conference for the second time, and Lewis took it one step further by also attending the Directors Policy Conference, really taking initiative in understanding and supporting AZA values. Additionally, the City Council volunteered at several Zoo events and received detailed briefings from Lewis on the importance of AZA's work.

"I came away with a deeper understanding of what AZA represents," said Lewis. "It's not just about animal care—it's about ethics, education, conservation, and community accountability. It

was clear to me that maintaining accreditation wasn't just good for the Zoo—it was essential for the City's credibility and future and for the community to feel good about investing in it."

AZA staff noted how refreshing it was to see a city manager at the table. But for Lewis, it was a no-brainer. "How can we expect our staff to reach for excellence if we don't show up ourselves?"

That support extended to tangible resources. The Council backed investments in facility upgrades, staffing, and training. Through Tourism Business Improvement District funds and the City's marketing efforts, the Zoo recently rebranded as the Central Coast Zoo, aligning tourism efforts with community pride. The Zoo is becoming a centerpiece for the region as a conservation hub, cultural asset, and economic driver. This has led to regional leaders reaching out to inquire about how they can support the Zoo.

The partnership also paid off in clarity and messaging. With a roadside Zoo just a town away, Atascadero's leadership wanted to make a strong public distinction: Central Coast Zoo meets the gold standard. That distinction reinforces the City's commitment to ethical, transparent, and community-serving operations, which are values that AZA accreditation supports.

As the Central Coast Zoo steps confidently into its next chapter after successfully completing the AZA accreditation application process once again, its story can serve as a model for other city-operated institutions. When a Zoo and its governing body share ownership of the accreditation process, the results speak not just to professional standards, but to the pride, trust, and investment of an entire community.

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