

May 6, 2025 – LWVCC Annual Meeting at Brookfield Zoo Chicago

Speaker - Dr Mike Adkesson - President and CEO of Brookfield Zoo Chicago

Dr. Mike shared the zoo's Next Century Plan which has a 15 year horizon with a 30 year vision. The Cook County Forest Preserve referendum that was passed November 8, 2022, has generated about \$4million/year which supports capital expenses. The zoo celebrated its 90 year anniversary last year. As the zoo was built in 1934, the buildings are almost 100 years old.

The increased revenue supports major repairs including plumbing, roofs, facades, safety upgrades, major equipment and structural repairs. In addition, the focus is on sustainable energy practices with the current and future updates. Dr. Mike talked about the major remodel of the Seven Seas exhibit where dolphins are housed. The exhibit has been upgraded and updated with sustainable materials and a more dynamic environment to stimulate a natural setting for the dolphins.

The zoo made a capital investment in Tropical Forest which is opening in July 2025. The former Tropic World housed gorillas, orangutans and South American monkeys and was the first indoor rainforest in the world when it opened in 1980. However, the building had no outdoor access and did not meet current standards for animal care and housing. The new building covers 3 acres of space and will offer new winter space for gorillas. With the new space, a bachelor group of gorillas will be introduced and housed in the zoo.

Dr. Mike talked about the extensive value of the zoo's investments. In addition to the animals' physical and psychological health, there is a large economic benefit to the community as the zoo generates jobs and revenue.

Brookfield Zoo Chicago aims to be welcoming for all and enjoys multiple school groups every year. The zoo sits on 235 acres of forest preserve land which allows expansion into a thematic and organizational approach to the new land use development. This type of expansion was not able to be achieved before the additional revenue was available. The expansion will allow creation of immersive ecoregions, and include the Conservation Campus, Wildlife Discovery and the historical core of the zoo.

The Gateway to Africa will inhabit 35 acres including savannas and forests. The zoo plans to bring elephants back and to educate people about the elephant, its habitat and survival risks in a more natural environment at the zoo. Future plans toward 2034 include building an amphitheater.

Questions from attendees asked about visitors to the zoo and we learned that Brookfield Zoo Chicago is visited by 2 million guests/yr with only about 15-20% from outside Chicago. The zoo created a wildlife health residency in partnership with the University of Illinois, and Dr. Mike discussed some of the science that has been done regarding the pangolin which is described as the most trafficked animal in the world. Four species of pangolin were in Asia, but they have been pretty much eliminated. Pressure on survival is now on the species in Africa. The science

done at the Brookfield Zoo Chicago helps to inform how to steward this animal in order to support its survival. Dr. Mike mentioned that care of zoo animals allows the animal to have choice and control.

Reported by Laura Davis