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## **White elephants**

**City can't afford \$39 million zoo exhibit**

LA Daily News

Those who care about the health and welfare of the Los Angeles Zoo's three pachyderms don't agree on what to do with the large and long-living mammals.

There's no dispute that the half-acre zoo enclosure the elephants now call home is inadequate.

But what nobody agrees on is whether the city should build them a new home in the zoo in Griffith Park or send them to live out the rest of their lives in a sanctuary with lots of open space.

One group thinks zoos are a relic of a primitive past and should be closed, or at least turned into nature preserves. But to zoo lovers and the millions of visitors, the idea of a zoo without elephants is unthinkable.

That debate might explain why the cost of building a new, 3.5-acre Elephants of Surin exhibit has ballooned to \$39 million, an impressive but far too costly plan given the city's dire financial situation.

But City Hall doesn't see things that way. Money is never an object for its pet projects. The new exhibit was endorsed by two City Council committees this week, and will head to the full council next week where passage seems all but assured.

Clearly, council members believe elephants deserve homes - at \$13 million apiece - that are at least the equal of those of the contributors who helped put these politicians into office.

Only a portion of the funding will come from Proposition CC, the 1998 voter-approved bond for new zoo facilities, and from fundraising. That would be appropriate, but as much as half would come from other municipal funding sources, such as park bond revenues and a \$14 million loan that would have to be repaid with interest from the general fund that provides services to the city's nearly 4 million human residents.

When politicians are preparing city residents for service cuts, fee hikes and possibly tax increases to cover the massive budget deficit, it's the wrong time to spend that sort of cash on a home for elephants.

City leaders say they can't afford to stop dumping trash in the San Fernando Valley, hire enough cops to make the streets safe or solve any of the other problems that would make L.A. a more liveable city. So how then can they justify spending this much on pachyderms?

The issue is priorities and City Hall still gets it wrong. Yes, the zoo is an important asset and needs to be fixed. But doubling the cost doesn't fix the elephants' problem as much as it fixes the political problem that has developed over the failure to care properly for the animals over a long period of time.

The Greater Los Angeles Zoo Association, the nonprofit fundraising arm of the zoo, is trying hard to make the facility better. But its members need to rethink this plan and scale it back to what's affordable and effective.

Because tapping the city's budget to turn three actual elephants into white elephants is unfair to residents.