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The elephant in the budget

DON'T EVEN THINK OF continuing to confine the Los Angeles Zoo's three elephants in their too-tiny half-acre pen. Even a 3 1/2-acre enclosure, which the City Council will vote on financing this week, amounts to an overcrowded dorm room for animals that need a more expansive space to thrive.

Private fund-raising and an already approved zoo bond would pay half of the \$39-million cost, but the rest would come from an existing park-improvement bond kitty that could instead be put toward badly needed park improvements for humans, plus a loan that would cost the city \$1 million a year to service.

That's a lot, especially with the mayor planning to raise fees and scour the budget for fat to trim in order to hire more police and eliminate a mounting structural deficit. Even so, the expense could be worth considering if it resulted in a place where the city's largest tenants could live in a reasonable amount of comfort and safety, and if the zoo's collection left visitors with both a new understanding of how the creatures live in the wild and a visceral awareness of how truly endangered they have become.

But times have changed. There once may have been some educational value in penning in elephants for people to see up close, even if it meant misery for the huge creatures. Today, though, we have learned enough about pachyderms and their habitat to know that they need bigger spaces to range, congregate and eat. New sanctuaries are being created not just to enhance the animals' own comfort but to better educate adults and schoolchildren about how much land one elephant, or two, or three, or a herd, must have if they are to survive. Displaying elephants in unnaturally small enclosures, even ones expanded by 700%, teaches the wrong lesson about nature and its endangered species.

Not all zoos must necessarily learn to live without their biggest crowd-pleasers. If a facility can afford an expansive space that comes closer to the size of open land available in preserves, more power to it. But just over one acre per animal, as the L.A. Zoo plans, is unreasonable. So is an expenditure of that much public money for a pen that's still too small.

The City Council should reject the new elephant pen, send its big lugs to a retirement home and reserve its park money for extra space for its other increasingly cramped residents.