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Decision of elephantine proportions ahead

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It's now been a year since City Council promised that it would, within six months, come up with a plan about what to do with the elephants at the El Paso Zoo.

Obviously, the well-being of Savannah and Juno, and by extension, all the inmates at the zoo, is not a high priority for City Council. After all, they're just animals.

Council members would do well to track the recent story of Gita the elephant, just the latest in a litany of tragedies in the elephant community throughout the country.

Gita had been at the Los Angeles Zoo since 1959 and had a long and painful (to her, at least) history of arthritis and foot problems.

On June 10 at 5 a.m., zookeepers found her sitting on her haunches like a dog, a life-threatening position for a massive elephant. Gita died at 9:40 that same morning.

That's bad enough, but it turns out that the 59-year-old elephant had been sitting like that since at least 8:45 the previous evening; a zoo employee saw her sitting like that and failed to report it.

Gita endured a painful life and probably suffered no little agony in the process of dying. What a shame that it took death to relieve the mental and physical tortures inflicted on her by people.

Are Savannah and Juno suffering mentally and/or physically? You figure it out.

Female Asian elephants are gregarious animals; that is, they like to form family groups of 30-50, according to www.animalinfo.org

Interestingly, if you call up the El Paso Zoo Web site and look at the Asian elephant information, you won't see anything about family groups.

Why?

Because there are only two elephants at the zoo and it would become obvious that Juno and Savannah are held in highly abnormal conditions.

Elephants can and do travel great distances in a day, up to around 30 miles, according to In Defense of Animals.

Interestingly, if you call up the El Paso Zoo Web site and look at the Asian elephant information, you won't see anything about how far they travel. People would naturally compare that picture with Savannah and Juno's squinchy little pen and think it aberrant, if not cruel.

The zoo likes to portray itself as being into education about animals.

Well, perhaps that should be called selective education. Only the facts that fit the politically correct picture.

City Council has oversight of the zoo, and it's up to City Council to do as much as possible within the limited physical confines of the zoo to make the inmates' lives as humane as possible.

City Council also should keep its word on finding a solution to the Savannah-Juno problem. Or is it a matter of sweeping the problems under the rug and hoping people will forget about them when they're uncomfortable problems that the council would just as soon ignore?

Zoos across the nation are reassessing what to do with their elephants. There will no doubt be some places like El Paso that, unless goaded into proactivity, will leave their elephants to die in place. Some are doing the right thing and allowing their elephants to live out their lives at an elephant sanctuary.

So what we're left with is the faint hope of El Paso City Council doing the right thing -- or anything, for that matter.

Any bets?

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