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Harper backs panda push for Toronto Zoo

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Prime Minister Stephen Harper has thrown his support behind the Toronto Zoo's panda campaign — a crucial step in the attraction's bid for a breeding pair.

The federal government's nod for the pandas was made public today, the same day a California-based animal protection organization called for the Toronto Zoo to give up its three remaining Elephants.

A letter dated Nov. 27 from Harper's chief of staff to zoo chairman Councillor Raymond Cho was received by the zoo's board of directors yesterday.

The letter, which predates the prime minister's recent trip to China in which he was snubbed by Chinese officials for not visiting the communist country sooner, hints the Pandas would have been discussed during that visit.

"Rest assured that our delegation will pursue the acquisition of pandas for the Zoo during the Prime Minister's visit. Our delegation will raise the issue during all pertinent meeting," reads Guy Giorno's letter to Cho. "Our Government would be delighted to assist in bringing Giant Pandas to Canada."

Councillor Giorgio Mammoliti, the loudest panda promoter on the board, said the letter virtually seals the deal to bring a pair of endangered giant pandas to Toronto on a 10-year loan.

"It's incredibly exciting," said Mammoliti, who was in China last month meeting with zoo officials there. "It is possible, it is within reach and the federal government is on board.

"Now, it really is about becoming lobbyists," he said, noting the zoo board has to stay on Harper to keep talking with Chinese officials about the Pandas.

But pachyderms, not pandas, should be the zoo's focus, according to some animal rights' groups and even a member of the zoo board.

In Defense of Animals, a California-based animal rights organization which bills itself as an international zoo watchdog, wrote Cho calling for an end to the zoo's "ill-fated" elephant exhibit in which four elephants have died in the past four years.

"Elephants at the Toronto Zoo are dying at an unprecedented rate," stated Catherine Doyle, the group's elephant specialist, in a press release yesterday. "The Toronto Zoo and the Board of Management can no longer ignore the mounting death toll or scientific evidence of the devastating effects of captivity on elephants.

"The exhibit must be shut down now before more elephants die," she wrote.

Early last week, the zoo herd's matriarch, Tara, died unexpectedly at the age of 41. In the summer, 39-year-old Tessa died after being pushed to the ground by another elephant.

The zoo now has three female African elephants, the minimum number allowed by the American Association of Zoos and Aquariums, of which the Toronto Zoo is an accredited member. Two of its remaining elephants — aged 39 and 40 — have reached the life expectancy of elephants in captivity.

But the recent deaths, while unfortunate, are not a reason to abandon the exhibit all together, according to members of the board.

"There's a movement now that says the Zoo shouldn't have elephants at all," Mammoliti said. "I don't agree with that. If it's a movement or a group of people that don't like zoos, I don't want to listen to them."

The zoo has plans to spend \$40 million to \$50 million over the next five years renovating and expanding the three-hectare elephant exhibit. It's part of an ambitious \$250 million 10-year fundraising goal, but the board only plans to raise \$15 million in the first five years of the campaign.

Given that the cupboards are extremely bare for the Zoo, councillor and zoo board member Paul Ainslie thinks instead of focusing on pandas, the zoo should focus on what it has already, including tackling a state-of-good-repair backlog of \$80 million.

The panda exhibit is expected to cost the zoo money, despite a surge in visitors in the first few years of the exhibit.

While Mammoliti and others think private sector donors should be approached to cover the cost of the pandas, Ainslie worries if the zoo — and in particular its fundraising efforts — are being diluted by what he calls a lack of focus.

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