

Senate Transportation Committee

Philadelphia Zoo

April 22, 2014

Testimony on Senate Bill 1210 – Pennsylvania Transit Revitalization Investment District (TRID) Act

Good morning, Senator Rafferty, and members of the Senate Transportation Committee. I am Kenneth Woodson, Vice President of Community and Government Affairs at the Philadelphia Zoo. It is my pleasure to present testimony on behalf of the Philadelphia Zoo regarding Senate Bill 1210.

The Philadelphia Zoo, America's First Zoo, is actively engaged in the development of transit and transportation improvements for the benefit of our neighbors in West Philadelphia, our employees, our volunteers and our guests.

During the Zoo's fiscal year 2014, which concluded at the end of February, the Philadelphia Zoo welcomed 1.3 million visitors. Of those guests, more than 80 percent traveled to the Zoo via private automobile. In addition, the Philadelphia Zoo employs 191 full time regular staff and works with 780 volunteers, all of whom regularly travel to and from the Zoo. These numbers show the need for an easy and efficient way to move people in and out of our area. This is why we support the implementation of a new regional rail station in close proximity to the Philadelphia Zoo that would provide easy access for our guests, volunteers and employees; and would spur additional, much needed economic development in the area. In addition, we believe that a new rail station will benefit community residents who must travel to suburban job markets. We believe that, if done right, Senate Bill 1210 would allow for these developments to occur in our region, and across the Commonwealth.

As an example of our continued commitment to our community, phase I of our transportation improvements were completed in April 2013 in response to longstanding concerns about traffic congestion and parking capacity. The Philadelphia Zoo, in partnership with federal, state, and city agencies, developed the Centennial District Intermodal Transportation Center. The new Intermodal Transportation Center includes a 4-story, 683-car parking garage, extensive changes to major roadways around the Zoo, traffic control systems, storm water control systems, new sustainable landscaping, dramatically improved streetscape lighting and walkways. The changes resulted in an enhanced visitor experience and a safer area for pedestrians and vehicles alike.

As noted, the Intermodal Transportation Center was phase I of our response to serious parking and traffic concerns. There is more that we need to do.

Zoo attendance fluctuates by season and day of the week. For example, just 10 days ago, on Sunday, April 13, Zoo attendance exceeded 14,000 people, which was the 5th busiest day in the past five years. Attendance will continue to grow as the Philadelphia Zoo continues as a world leader in conservation education and innovative Zoo experiences. The Zoo cannot economically and feasibly build enough parking garages to provide for our staff and guests on our busiest days.

The most feasible way to accommodate a growing attendance base, as well as improve the experience for our neighbors – the residents of East Parkside and Mantua in West Philadelphia -- is to improve public transit access to the Zoo and its surrounding communities. We believe, given that more than 60% of the people who visit the Zoo live outside Philadelphia, that the development of a new regional rail station would be the best way to improve public transit access.

A new regional rail station would support the Philadelphia Zoo's long-term attendance and conservation goals, provide greater access to suburban job markets for West Philadelphia residents, and improved access to the cultural institutions, universities, and medical facilities in the area. Such improved access will greatly benefit those out of town, particularly out of state, tourists who may be visiting Philadelphia without their own vehicle.

An example of the impact that a regional rail station can have, can be found in Portland, Oregon. The Westside Max public transit line, built in 1998, services the Oregon Zoo with a stop near the Zoo's main entrance. In 1996, before the Max line opened, the Oregon Zoo's annual attendance was 1.1 million. By 2013, annual attendance had increased to 1.7 million. The Oregon Zoo management attributes the location of the rail station as a contributing factor to the increase in attendance.

As part of our planning for a new rail station near the Philadelphia Zoo, we have partnered with the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation and Drexel University to host a ½ day planning Charrette on May 5, 2014. A group that will include public officials, business and community leaders, and real estate developers, will evaluate the prospect of Transit Oriented Development Projects near the new rail station. Senate Bill 1210 will be discussed as a possible tool that could assist in the development of the station and related Transit Oriented Development projects.

In summary, we believe that the Zoo's long-term success and economic contributions to the Commonwealth and greater Philadelphia region are directly tied to our ability to provide ease of access to our customers and employees. Therefore, public policy that will help communities grow through investment in infrastructure is something the Philadelphia Zoo supports. We look forward to being a part of the continued discussions to ensure that the Zoo is able to utilize a TRID as a tool to improve the surrounding community.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this important public policy matter at today's hearing on behalf of the Philadelphia Zoo.