

Vote keeps zoo alive for 5 more years **Supporters in audience cheer. Price tag is \$1.8 million.

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The Lehigh Valley Zoo, on the verge of bankruptcy since December, will stay in business at least for the next five years.

As a crowd of more than 50 zoo supporters cheered, the Lehigh County commissioners voted 7-1 Wednesday night to continue funding the park through 2013. The vote means the county will subsidize zoo operations with about \$1.8 million over that period.

"The zoo is an important part of the fabric of the Lehigh Valley. This is part of the quality of life, the reason why we love living here," said Commissioner Chairman Percy Dougherty, who originally had reservations about the amount of money sought, but voted with the majority.

The funding, which will amount to \$525,000 this year and \$325,000 in each of the next four years, comes with strings attached.

The board of the Lehigh Valley Zoological Society, which runs the zoo, will have to submit to greater county oversight that will include the hiring of an executive chosen by the county administration to assist the zoo director.

The zoo's board will also have to make a financial presentation to the county every six months and create oversight committees to monitor operations. The board must also agree that no taxpayer money will be used to pay off a \$250,000 line of credit that the zoo has maxed out.

Zoo directors will vote on the conditions later this month. Directors at the meeting said they are confident they would be approved.

A show of hands before the meeting confirmed that everyone in the crowd favored keeping the zoo open.

"I'm a native of the Lehigh Valley and have many fond memories of the zoo. Now I enjoy creating new memories with my two sons," said Jenae Holtzhafer of Emmaus, one of the organizers of the facebook.com group Save The Lehigh Valley Zoo.

Amanda Jones, 11, a student at Shoemaker Elementary School in Macungie and an aspiring veterinarian, said the zoo is important to her and its closing would make her sad.

Commissioner Dean Browning was the lone no vote on the board, citing a desire to take more time to ensure the zoo would abide by the commissioners' conditions.

Browning had proposed an alternative plan that would have handed over \$100,000 to the zoo to pay expenses for the coming month while commissioners worked with the zoo's board to ensure they have a viable plan for survival.

Commissioner Glenn Eckhart could not attend the meeting.

Even with the requested county funding, the zoo will still be about \$100,000 to \$200,000 short of meeting expenses each year. Zoo administrator Stacey Johnson has said the zoo hopes to make up that money through overhead cuts, fundraising and marketing to increase visitors.

Johnson has said the zoo will focus on children and education, changing the name to the Lehigh Valley Children's Zoo. On Wednesday night, Johnson said he was "elated" by the commissioners' decision.

"This gives us the momentum we were looking for to move forward," Johnson said. "It's the community leverage to be able to say, 'We are a valued community institution and we have the county's support. Let's build a zoo together.'"

County Executive Don Cunningham supported funding the zoo. He raised the issue during his State of the County address Wednesday.

"When you consider that 70 cents out of every county tax dollar go toward law and order -- running our court operations,

our prison, our probationary program, our sheriff's office -- it is imperative that we invest some money into quality-of-life programs that can be enjoyed by everyone," he said.

Since 2004, the county has contributed an average of about \$400,000 per year. Even so, the zoo lost nearly \$200,000 last year.

Credit: By Darryl R. Isherwood Of The Morning Call

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[Illustration]

Caption: **1. NICOLE BECKER, an animal keeper at Lehigh Valley Zoo, feeds the jackass penguins on Wednesday. The penguins, brought to this country from southern Africa, arrived at the zoo near Schnecksville last fall. **2. THANKS TO WEDNESDAY'S VOTE, this ostrich and other animals at the zoo will stay put. **3. VIEWING THE PENGUINS at Lehigh Valley Zoo are (from left) Logan Fisher, 5, and Dylan Fisher, 3, both of Minersville, and Rosiegrace Strydesky, 2, and Lucy Strydesky, 4, both of Macungie. [3 Photos By Rob Kandel, The Morning Call]

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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