toronto zoo

REPORT FOR ACTION

2026 Operating Plan and Budget

Date: September 24, 2025
To: Board of Management of the Toronto Zoo
From: Chief Transformation Officer
Wards: All

SUMMARY

This report submits the Toronto Zoo 2026 Operating Plan and Budget for approval. The Policy and Finance Committee reviewed the 2026 Operating Plan and Budget on 2025-09-23 and recommended it for approval by the Board.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Chief Transformation Officer recommends that:

1. The Board of Management of the Toronto Zoo approve the 2026 Operating Plan and Budget as described in this report.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

Approval of the 2026 Operating Plan and Budget will require $13.1 million in net expenditure funding from the City of Toronto. This represents a 1.5% increase from the 2025 budget and a 2.6% decrease from 2024 actuals. The total gross expenditure is projected at $74.8 million, offset by $61.7 million in revenues and recoveries.

OVERVIEW

In its 51st year, Toronto Zoo continues to serve as a leading conservation-focused tourism destination. With over 3,000 animals across 280+ species, the Zoo welcomes more than 1.3 million visitors annually. In addition to wildlife habitats, it delivers year-round educational programming, youth employment, and community initiatives.

The Zoo's mission - Connecting people, animals, conservation science, and traditional knowledge to fight extinction - drives the Guardians of Wild 2025–2027 Strategic Plan, which forms the basis of this budget. This plan prioritizes conservation leadership, scientific advancement, and exceptional guest experiences, while aligning financial resources with strategic objectives.

In partnership with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), and other local and global organizations, the Zoo continues to advance biodiversity goals. Delivering measurable conservation impact is vital to long-term success and requires close integration of strategy and financial planning. It also supports the advancement of key City strategies including TransformTO Net Zero Strategy and Toronto Ravine Strategy.

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1) Performance and Trends

Attendance:
2025 attendance is projected to fall below the 1.39 million guest target due to extreme weather experienced through much of the year and economic uncertainty that has impacted consumer confidence.

2026 attendance is projected to reach 1.395 million, supported by:
- Opening of the Community Conservation Centre
- Launch of an evening lantern festival (Fall 2026)
- Renovated animal habitats offering new guest viewing opportunities (e.g. river otter, red panda, herd barn).

Base attendance estimation for 2026 is at 1.395 million guests, representing an increase of 0.3% (5,000 guests) compared to 2025 budget levels, or 8.40% over last twelve months attendance through July 31, 2025. This projection is based on recent attendance trends and year-end forecasts and represents a reasonable and attainable target. It will be referenced in communications with the City of Toronto's Financial Planning Division as a basis for the Zoo's 2026 Operating Budget submission.

Revenue:
- 2025 admissions and several guest-driven discretionary spending revenue categories are facing pressuring, while food sales, memberships, and education programs remained steady or exceeded budget targets.
- 2026 guest revenues are projected to increase by 3% over 2025 budget to $61.7 million, enabled through attendance recovery, user fee adjustments and a new evening lantern festival to be introduced in Fall 2026.
- Fundraising through the Zoo's Wildlife Conservancy has raised more than $24 million over the past five years, with $7 million projected for 2026.

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2) 2026 Budget Summary

The Toronto Zoo's 2026 Operating Budget projects **revenues of $61.7 million** and **gross expenditures of $74.8 million**, resulting in a **net budget requirement of $13.1 million** from the City of Toronto. This represents a **$0.2 million (1.5%) net increase** compared to the 2025 approved budget. Total staff complement is projected to increase from **455.0 to 463.0 positions**, reflecting the addition of eight full-time equivalents (FTEs).

The 2026 revenues and expenditures amount to a 3.3% and 3.0% increase over 2025 budgeted levels. Compared to 2025 projected actuals, however, the 2026 increases are more significant. This is the result of reduced attendance and guest revenues in 2025 due to extreme winter and summer weather and broader economic conditions. Corresponding expense reductions have been in place since Q1 2025 to preserve the approved net expenditure target.

Operating Budget								
			2025	2026	Chg from 2025 Budget		OUTLOOK	
$ Thousands	2024 Actual	2025 Budget	Projection*	Budget	$	%	2027	2028
Revenues	$53,837	$59,684	$53,684	$61,673	$1,989	3.3%	$62,938	$64,447
Gross Expenditures	$67,324	$72,624	$66,624	$74,801	$2,178	3.0%	$77,105	$79,614
Net Expenditures	$13,487	$12,940	$12,940	$13,128	$188	1.5%	$14,168	$15,167
Approved Positions**	448.6	455.0	455.0	463.0	8.0	2%	470.0	477.0

*Projection based on 6 Month Variance

**YoY comparison based on approved positions

The 2026 Operating Budget submission of $74.8M in total gross expenditures includes investment in two primary service areas:

Zoo Conservation & Wildlife ($28.6M)

- Wildlife care and well-being programs
- Conservation science and reproductive services
- Biodiversity and climate-focused programming

Zoo Visitor Services ($46.2M)

- Guest experiences and attractions
- Facility maintenance and improvements
- Events and experiences

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3) 2026 Priority Actions

Consistent with the Guardians of Wild 2025-2027 Strategic Plan, the 2026 Operating Budget submission is guided by the Zoo's **"Four Cares"** (Animals, Team, Guests/Community, and Climate) frame its priorities:

1. **Belonging**
    - Complimentary field trips for all Toronto students (TDSB & TCDSB) starting Fall 2026.
    - Continuing complimentary access for Indigenous persons as part of the Zoo's

commitment to truth and reconciliation.
- Strengthen equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility programs.
- Partnerships with Toronto Community Housing and Scarborough community organizations.

2. **Nature's Insurance Policy**
   - Support the protection of Canadian wildlife through the accreditation and expansion of Canada's National Cryobank at the Toronto Zoo, together with conservation breeding and reintroduction efforts.
   - Continued breeding/release of Canadian species (e.g., Blanding's turtles).
   - Collaboration with Indigenous partners (Turtle Island Conservation Program).
   - Energy retrofit projects to support net zero emissions by 2030.

3. **Wildlife Advocates**
   - Habitat upgrades and state-of-good-repair projects in preparation for 2027 AZA accreditation inspections.
   - New site-wide interpretive plan and increased public engagement.
   - AI and data analytics for reproductive biology and animal wellbeing.
   - Partnerships with U of T Scarborough, Scarborough Health Network and other community and conservation organizations.

4. **Wow for Good**
   - Opening of new Community Conservation Centre (Fall 2026)
   - Launch of a new evening lantern festival (Fall 2026).
   - Development of a long-term Campus Plan for site improvements aligned with the Strategic Plan.
   - Enhanced guest experiences through technology and personalized engagement.

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4) 2026 Planned New and Key Initiatives

More specifically, the 2026 Operating Budget will enable advancement of four key initiatives including:

1. **Community Conservation Centre (Fall 2026 Launch)**
   The new Community Conservation Centre, opening at the Zoo's front entrance in late 2026, will become a hub for conservation education, partnerships, and visitor engagement.
   - Rationale: The Community Conservation Centre provides a dedicated space for youth education, Indigenous-led programming, and collaborative community initiatives.
   - Impact: Expands accessibility, strengthens Scarborough community ties, and positions the Zoo as a citywide leader in environmental learning.
   - Features: Interactive learning spaces, event hosting capacity, and integration with Zoo-wide interpretive programs.
   - Budget: The Conservation Center is projected to have an operating impact of $300,000 in 2026, reflecting the addition of four new FTEs and marketing expenses. The annualized impact is estimated to increase by $400,000 in 2027.

2. **Complimentary School Field Trips (Equity in Education)**
   Starting in Fall 2026, the plan is to provide all students from Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) with access to complimentary field trips to the Zoo during the school year, pending approval.
   - Rationale: This removes financial barriers for families, ensuring equitable access to environmental education.
   - Impact: Builds ecological literacy, engages youth in conservation and climate awareness, and supports the City's Poverty Reduction Strategy, TransformTO Net Zero Strategy and Toronto Ravine Strategy.
   - Budget: $500,000 for half year in 2026, annualized at $950,000 from 2027 onward.

   This initiative is a new and enhanced ask to the City and subject to support from the City to proceed to budget approvals by City Council.

3. **Expansion and Accreditation of Canada's National Animal Genetic Resource Bank (Cryobank)**
   The Zoo is advancing the expansion and international accreditation of Canada's National Cryobank, strengthening its role as a national resource for safeguarding genetic diversity.
   - Rationale: Expansion will increase storage capacity and scientific capabilities, while accreditation will align the Cryobank with global conservation standards, fostering collaboration with leading institutions. The goal is to support the long-term sustainability of wildlife populations, including those in the Zoo's care.
   - Impact: These efforts will enhance the Zoo's ability to support breeding and reintroduction programs, such as the release and monitoring of Blanding's turtles in the Rouge Valley, while establishing the Cryobank as a cornerstone of Canadian wildlife conservation.
   - Budget: The 2026 Cyrobank operating budget totals $260,000, including costs for accreditation, governance development, start-up consumables and equipment, along with funding for the position of Caribou Biobank Coordinator.

4. **Evening Lantern Festival (Fall 2026)**
   The Zoo will launch a new nighttime lantern festival to enhance seasonal programming and attract new audiences.
   - Rationale: Provides a distinctive cultural and artistic experience that extends Zoo attendance into evening hours.
   - Impact: Expected to bolster visitation during the fall shoulder season, driving revenue while deepening community connections.
   - Strategic Role: Supports the "Wow for Good" priority by delivering personalized, memorable guest experiences and fostering awareness of conservation issues.
   - Budget: The 2026 revenue projection includes a net contribution of $1.3 million from the Lantern Festival, based on the sale of 150,000 tickets between September and November 2026 (Wednesday to Sunday). Setup costs of $300,000 are reflected in the 2026 capital budget.

5) 2026 Budget by Category

Total revenues are projected at $61.7 million, up 3.3% from the 2025 budget and 14.9% from the 2025 projection, driven by increased user fees, higher membership revenue, expanded program offerings and a new lantern festival to be introduced in Fall 2026. Gross expenditures are budgeted at $74.8 million, rising 3.0% from budget and 12.3% from projection, primarily due to higher materials and supplies for expanded animal care and conservation programs, operating costs for the new Conservation Community Center, contractual commitments, and planned equipment investments.

The table below summarizes compares key 2026 budgeted revenue and expenditure categories with recent actuals, budget and projected year end totals:

Category (In $000s)	2024 Actual	2025 Budget	2025 Projection*	2026 Budget	2026 Change from 2025 Budget		2026 Change from 2025 Projection	
	$	$	$	$	$	%	$	%
Restricted contributions and grants	1,787	2,797	1,947	2,802	5.4	0.2%	855.4	43.9%
Admission	21,346	23,137	19,150	23,669	532.1	2.3%	4,519.1	23.6%
Membership	4,974	5,546	5,989	5,913	366.8	6.6%	(76.2)	(1.3%)
Food services	10,115	10,199	10,199	10,802	603.5	5.9%	603.5	5.9%
Gift shop operations	3,346	3,495	3,061	3,399	(96.3)	(2.8%)	337.7	11.0%
Parking	4,438	6,325	5,236	6,956	631.0	10.0%	1,720.0	32.9%
Rides and rentals	2,636	2,877	2,394	2,967	90.5	3.1%	573.5	24.0%
Education programs	1,291	1,338	1,430	1,539	200.9	15.0%	108.9	7.6%
Other revenue and recoveries	2,968	3,183	3,248	3,626	443.5	13.9%	378.5	11.7%
Capital works contribution	858	614	857	0	(614.0)	(100.0%)	(857.0)	(100.0%)
Development	79	174	174	0	(174.0)	(100.0%)	(174.0)	(100.0%)
Total Revenues	**53,837**	**59,684**	**53,684**	**61,673**	**1,989.3**	**3.3%**	**7,989.3**	**14.9%**
Salaries	32,162	33,348	34,012	34,210	861.9	2.6%	198.0	0.6%
Benefits	8,076	8,206	8,733	8,689	482.9	5.9%	(43.7)	(0.5%)
Materials & Supplies	6,704	6,406	5,308	6,327	(79.6)	(1.2%)	1,018.3	19.2%
Equipment	1,630	2,023	474	1,324	(698.7)	(34.5%)	849.7	179.1%
Service and Rent	18,004	21,894	17,550	23,606	1,712.0	7.8%	6,056.2	34.5%
Contribution To Reserves/Reserve Funds	746	746	546	645	(101.0)	(13.5%)	99.0	18.1%
Total Gross Expenditures	**67,324**	**72,624**	**66,624**	**74,801**	**2,177.5**	**3.0%**	**8,177.5**	**12.3%**
Net Expenditures	**13,487**	**12,940**	**12,940**	**13,128**	**188.2**	**1.5%**	**188.2**	**1.5%**

*Projection based on 6 Month Variance

6) Key Cost Drivers

Key factors affecting the 2026 operating budget development include the following:

- **Attendance & Revenue Growth**: Maintaining recovery with steady visitation.
- **Inflationary Pressures**: Rising costs for feed, construction, and utilities.
- **Strategic Priorities**: Expanded investments in conservation science and animal care.

The table below summarizes the major 2026 budget changes from the 2025 totals:

(In $000s)	2026				2027 Annua zed mpact (Net)	Comments
	Revenues	Gross	Net	Positions**		
2025 Projection*	**53,684**	**66,624**	**12,940**	**455.0**	**N/A**	
2025 Budget	**59,684**	**72,624**	**12,940**	**455.0**	**N/A**	
Key Cost Drivers:						
Prior Year Impacts						
Operating Impacts of Capital						
Community Conservation Centre (Welcome Area)		300	300	4.0	400	Additional 4 FTEs including maintenance, horticulture, technology and event staff to support opening of the new Community Conservation Centre
Salary & Benefits						
COLA/Salary/Benefit Adjustments		670	670			Annual increases for permanent and exempt staff
Non-Salary Inflation						
Corporate Economic Factors		102	102			City specified net rate adjustments (e.g. fuel, utilities)
Other Base Changes						
Conservation, education and animal welfare		3,012	3,012	3.5		Investments in conservation science research, field equipment, animal welfare and interpretive plan. Includes new Director of Education position and additional FTEs for Reproductive Science, Wildlife Health and Nutrition Science
Guest experience and health and safety		688	688			Adjustments to health and safety for medical services and equipment, other inflationay increases
Administration, facilities and project delivery		714	714	0.5		Increase for facility maintenance requirements, AZA accreditation inspections and Campus Plan development
Revenue Adjustment						
Attendance forecast	(159)		159			Maintain attendance target at 1.39 million with adjustment to attendance composition to account for higher shares of member and discount visits
User fee adjustments	889		(889)			Various fee adjustments for admissions, memberships, education programs, food services, attractions and parking
Other revenues	(341)	(600)	(259)			Lower estimates on rebates and tax recovery
Grants and donations		(800)	(800)			Deferred revenue and reserve funds leveraged
New revenue program	1,600	300	(1,300)			Net revenue changes from introduction of new evening lantern festival in Fall 2026
Sub Total Key Cost Drivers	**1,989**	**4,386**	**2,396**	**8.0**	**400**	
Enhance Digital Solutions and Service Costs		(40)	(40)			Efficiency Savings
Streamline Procurement and Contract Management		(130)	(130)			Efficiency Savings
Line by Line/Matching Actuals		(2,038)	(2,038)			Reductions based on zero-based budgeting and alignment with 2024 projected spending
Sub Total Affordability Measures		**(2,208)**	**(2,208)**	**0**		
Total 2026 Budget	**61,673**	**74,801**	**13,128**	**463.0**		
Change from 2025 Budget ($)	**1,989**	**2,178**	**188**	**0**	**N/A**	
Change from 2025 Budget (%)	**3%**	**3%**	**1%**	**2%**	**N/A**	

*Based on 6 Month Variance
**YoY comparison based on approved positions

Key cost drivers increase net spending by $4.4M, mainly due to:

- Operating Impacts of Capital ($300,000): Additional 4.0 FTEs to support opening of Community Conservation Centre in Fall 2026.
- Salary and Benefits ($670,000): Annual increases for permanent and exempt staff.
- Non-Salary Inflation ($102,000): City-specified adjustments (e.g., fuel and utilities.
- Conservation, Education, and Animal Welfare ($3.012 million, +3.5 FTEs): Expanded conservation research, animal welfare, and interpretive programs, including a new Director of Education and staff for reproductive, wildlife health, and nutrition sciences.
- Guest Experience, Health, and Safety ($688,000): Inflationary medical costs, plus maintenance, horticulture, and event staff for the new Community Conservation Centre.
- Administration, Facilities, and Project Delivery ($714,000, +0.5 FTEs): Increasing facility maintenance requirements, funding for AZA inspections and campus plan update, and technology staff to support the Community Conservation Centre.

Revenue adjustments partially offset pressures:

- Attendance-related revenues down (-$159,000) due to adjustments in visitor composition accounting for more member/discount visits within the 1.395 million visitor target.

- Net increase in user fees of $889,000 offset by a decrease in other revenues ($341,000). User fee changes include $1 increase in maximum admission rate under the Zoo's dynamic pricing model, 3% increase in rides, 4% to 7% in membership revenue categories, and 5% to 7% increase in Zoo camps and education programs.
- New revenue from the evening lantern festival ($1.3 million) starting Fall 2026.

Affordability measures save (-$2.2 million) via zero-based budgeting and line by line reviews (-$2.0 million) and efficiency savings ($170,000). The savings from line by line reviews were mainly contributed from reduction of non-permanent salary expenses, contracted services, equipment and other discretionary expenses.

Overall, the 2026 budget balances inflationary and strategic investments with savings, resulting in modest growth in revenues (3.3%), gross expenditures (3.0%) and net City funding (1.5%).

Conclusion

The 2026 operating budget balances financial pressures with strategic growth. It emphasizes conservation leadership, expanded educational access (notably free school visits), climate action, and enhanced guest experiences, all while maintaining fiscal responsibility through savings and alternative funding.

The 2026 Operating Budget submission to the Financial Planning Division of the City of Toronto will take place in accordance with prescribed deadlines. Approval by the Board will ensure the continued implementation of approved initiatives and strategies of the Board and senior management.

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