

Link: <https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/san-francisco-zoo-safety-18986471.php>

A grizzly bear chase. A dead penguin. Behind the scenes, the S.F. Zoo is in turmoil over safety



A visitor looks

into the grizzly bear grotto at the San Francisco Zoo in San Francisco on March 15. Last May, a keeper was chased by a bear after a door was accidentally left open. No one was hurt.

Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

By [Tara Duggan](#)

April 17, 2024

One Saturday morning last May, a keeper at the San Francisco Zoo heard footsteps behind him in the grizzly bear grotto. Believing it was a co-worker, he turned, only to see the hulking brown form of Kiona. He thought he'd safely locked her in her den, but the door, which is operated from an adjoining room, had an unusual feature: Its lock could be fastened even without the door being securely closed.

The zookeeper began to run, and with Kiona in pursuit, he circled the grotto, according to people familiar with his account. He then sprinted through the door into the keeper area, according to surveillance video. When Kiona stopped briefly, the keeper escaped through a gate and closed it behind him.

At that point, the almost 500-pound grizzly ambled into the keeper area and was separated from the public by a gate, a regular door and a chain-link barrier, said Travis Shields, then the assistant curator of the zoo's carnivores department, which includes the bears.

Shields was away at the time but was briefed by workers who were involved or listening on the radio.

Zoo employees who came to the keeper's aid found him in a panic and the grizzly roaming the keeper area, Shields said. The zookeepers managed to coax Kiona into her other outdoor habitat and locked the doors.



INSET: Bear territory

The San Francisco Zoo features two grizzly bears at Grizzly Gulch. The bears' dens are in a concrete enclosure that is part of an adjoining grotto, which dates back to the Great Depression.

Map: Todd Trumbull/The Chronicle • Source: San Francisco Zoo • Satellite image: Landsat/Copernicus, Google Earth

No one was hurt during the close call, which has not been previously reported. But an investigation by the Chronicle shows that it was one of several incidents in recent years in which employee safety or animal welfare at the San Francisco Zoo was compromised, a situation that has led many workers to resign or say they have lost faith in the management of the [95-year-old institution](#).

There's a long history of tension between the zoo's top brass and its front-line workers. The 100-acre, city-owned facility in the southwest corner of San Francisco has worked to rebound from high-profile troubles that rattled employees and shocked the public, including the Christmas Day 2007 [killing of a guest](#) by an escaped tiger and the crushing [death of a baby gorilla](#) in 2014.

But the continuing problems, including the previously unreported death last year of a young penguin struck by a "guillotine" door, have sapped morale and prompted high turnover among the staff trained to care for more than 2,000 animals, said Corey Hallman, a representative of the zoo's 95-member labor union. The problems, in his view, could lead to further incidents.

"Eventually something more severe is going to happen in the future if they continue on the same path," said Shields, who resigned last July over what he described as upper management's disregard of keepers' concerns.

The Chronicle presented zoo leaders with details of recent incidents at the zoo that prompted concerns from workers. Edward Poole, a board member and chair emeritus of the San Francisco Zoological Society, the nonprofit membership organization that operates the zoo for the city, said by email that the questions were “predicated on outdated or simply untrue information” and were “uniformly objectionable and baseless.”

Poole said that the incident in the grizzly bear grotto did not endanger guests and that a subsequent U.S. Department of Agriculture inspection found the zoo in compliance with its license.

“One of our zookeepers entered the grizzly bear’s habitat area at a time when it was believed that the bear was restricted to another part of its containment area,” he said. He wrote that “due to a number of safety measures employed, the situation was quickly resolved. ... This incident underscores our steadfast commitment to ensuring the welfare of both our staff and the animals in our care.”

Close call with a grizzly bear

When the door to grizzly bear Kiona’s den was left open in May 2023, Kiona entered an area where a zookeeper was working. A surveillance camera captured what happened.

Video: <https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/san-francisco-zoo-safety-18986471.php> Daymond Gascon and Todd Trumbull/The Chronicle • Source: Chronicle reporting • Note: This video has no sound. The diagram is not to scale.

The zoo made updates to improve the lock system in the 1930s-era grizzly bear grotto in the months following the incident, zookeeper logs obtained by the Chronicle show.

It’s rare for zoo animals, especially dangerous ones, to escape “primary containment” — meaning the specific enclosure areas designated for their use — said Dan Ashe, CEO of the [Association of Zoos and Aquariums](#), which provides accreditation to the San Francisco Zoo and over 250 other facilities worldwide.

The close encounter between the keeper and grizzly occurred at a time when the San Francisco Zoo was already struggling to retain skilled animal care staff. The zoo typically has around 12 curators, or managers, but since 2020, nine have resigned and one has retired, according to interviews, LinkedIn profiles and internal emails obtained by the Chronicle. Though most curator positions have been filled, the employees who left each had between 10 and 50 years of experience in animal care.

The number of zookeepers and other union staff decreased by 19% between 2019 and late 2023, Hallman, the union representative and a former zookeeper, said, leaving remaining keepers in charge of more animal exhibits. “It’s a public safety and worker safety issue,” he said.

Poole said that “the zoo takes safety — and the concerns of its staff seriously,” noting that management hosts a regular safety committee meeting. The zoo has hired several zookeepers in recent months, according to Vitus Leung, the zoo’s deputy director. Poole said that the ratio of keepers to animals has increased in the past five years, with the number of animals in major categories like apes, birds and carnivores declining.

Three former employees said in interviews that they quit mainly due to disagreements with zoo administrators over animal welfare standards. Melissa Lory, a zookeeper from 2019 to 2021; Trisha Cassianni, a keeper from 2007 to 2021; and Dayna Sherwood, a keeper from 2006 to 2018, each cited a case or cases when, in their view, animals suffered because of decisions made by upper management about medical care or housing.



Melissa Lory at

her home in San Leandro on Feb. 5. Lory, a zookeeper at the San Francisco Zoo from 2019 to 2021, was concerned about the living conditions of orangutans she cared for.

Gabrielle Lurie/The Chronicle

“I knew nothing was going to change as far as my welfare concerns I had for the animals I was responsible for,” said Lory, who was an orangutan keeper during a six-month period when, she said, the primates lived in an enclosure without access to a yard. “I knew it was going to continue getting worse.”

Cassianni, who also worked with the orangutans, described the zoo as “dysfunctional,” saying, “It just didn’t seem like the zoo cared enough about the animals.”

In his emailed comments, Poole said the zoo has provided excellent care to its animals, many of which are endangered or rescued, despite the “unprecedented challenges” of the pandemic. He touted the zoo’s conservation programs and noted that the zoo has received accreditation every five years by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and passed annual inspections by the USDA.

“Combined, these evaluations comprehensively assess our animal care, veterinary care and animal handling procedures,” Poole said.

Fifteen additional current and former animal care employees shared concerns with the Chronicle about the zoo’s oversight of animal welfare standards and said they felt that upper management was dismissive of employee input. These workers agreed to speak only on condition of anonymity because they still work at the zoo or in the field and said they feared professional repercussions. Several said they remained shaken by what happened to their co-worker in the grizzly bear grotto. The Chronicle granted them anonymity under the newspaper’s [confidential source policy](#).

One of the 15 employees said they had brought up concerns about grizzly bear security to management years before the May 2023 event. “I just felt intensely, but ambiguously, unsafe,” the person said in an email.

The zoo, which is overseen by the city’s [Recreation and Park Commission](#), is recovering from the loss of income caused by COVID lockdowns. Zoo revenue dropped from \$24.5 million during the fiscal year ending in June 2019 to \$20.5 million the following year, tax documents show. Revenue then increased to \$36 million in the 2022 fiscal year, leaving \$9.7 million after expenses, the highest surplus in a decade.

San Francisco provides \$4 million a year in taxpayer money to support the zoo. Much of its remaining funding comes from admission fees, retail sales, donations and membership dues. The city’s annual contribution hasn’t changed since the Zoological Society took

over zoo operations in 1993, and the zoo has not received a major influx of public funds to renovate its aging structures since a [\\$48 million bond measure](#) passed in 1997.

While the city owns the zoo and its animals, the Zoological Society's lease agreement with the parks department makes it "responsible for all day-to-day maintenance and management of the grounds, buildings and facilities, including the animal enclosures," Daniel Montes, a parks spokesperson, said in an email. Phil Ginsburg, the department's general manager, declined a request to be interviewed.

On Thursday, Mayor London Breed announced that the zoo [will receive giant pandas](#) from China, after lobbying for them for months. (The timeline of their arrival is unclear.) Poole said hosting the pandas would be a "great win."

Aftermath of a mauling

The ongoing turmoil at the zoo comes more than 16 years after a tragedy that prompted a management upheaval. Around closing time on Christmas evening in 2007, a Siberian tiger named Tatiana escaped her enclosure, [killing a 17-year-old guest](#), Carlos Eduardo Sousa Jr., and mauling his two friends before being shot and killed by police. The same tiger [had mauled zookeeper](#) Lori Komejan a year earlier, permanently damaging her hand and arm.



Tatiana, a female Siberian tiger, is seen at the San Francisco Zoo in 2006. On Christmas Day in 2007, the tiger escaped her enclosure and killed one person and mauled two others, before being shot and killed by police. The year before, the same tiger mauled a zookeeper. Penni Gladstone/The Chronicle

The zoo [settled a lawsuit](#) with Sousa's family for an undisclosed amount and later settled another lawsuit with his friends, [brothers Kulbir and Amritpal Dhaliwal](#), for \$900,000, sources told the Chronicle at the time. The zoo renovated the tiger enclosure after its walls were found to be [4 feet lower](#) than national standards when the attack occurred. Komejan also [settled a lawsuit](#) with the city of San Francisco for an undisclosed sum.

Tanya Peterson, a former [lawyer for Hewlett-Packard](#) who had served on the zoo's board, was brought in as interim director in June 2008. She was charged with taking over an institution beset by what the zoo's board chair told the Chronicle at the time was a "horrific [communication and morale crisis](#)."

Peterson stayed on and became CEO and executive director, a post she still holds at a \$339,500 annual salary as of the 2022 fiscal year. Through Poole, she declined an interview request.

Tensions between staff and management that were present before Peterson's tenure have continued.

Workers' criticisms of Peterson extend beyond animal care practices. They cite the zoo's recent hiring of her daughter as a paid intern at a time when the zoo had cut back on internships, and of her fiancé, Gregory Dayton, to perform concerts there. Payments made to both were confirmed by Leung, the zoo's deputy director. Recruitment and interview guidelines given to hiring managers at the zoo, and obtained by the Chronicle, state that "employment decisions are based on merit" and recommend "blind" hiring.

Some employees note that until recently, Peterson's main Facebook photo showed her lying on a beach just a few feet from a seal, though federal guidelines say that "Taking 'selfies' with seals or sea lions from close distances is illegal."

Peterson did not respond to a request for comment on these complaints.

"The board has great confidence in the leadership of Tanya Peterson," said Elena Asturias, who left the board in March after being a community representative for 20 years. She praised Peterson's fundraising abilities and said the zoo is a complex public-private partnership with stakeholders "bonded together by love of animals."

Some staff concerns are similar to those that arose during contract negotiations in April 2014. Members of the zoo's union then cast a vote of no-confidence in Peterson, saying in a letter to the zoo's board that the director "promoted a punitive/retaliatory culture" and "failed to provide proper oversight and senior management accountability on safety issues." The letter said that panic buttons were found to be faulty in some "code red" animal enclosures — defined as holding the most dangerous animals such as big cats, rhinos, great apes and grizzlies.

After a 16-month-old gorilla named Kabibe was fatally crushed under a downward-closing door later in 2014, [five employees](#) told the Chronicle that they had brought up safety concerns before her death. An outside investigator determined that the [door system](#) needed to be replaced, and the USDA fined the zoo \$1,750. Both said that workers could not see the door opening clearly, which made it difficult to determine whether the gorilla was out of harm's way.

In an [opinion piece](#) published in the Chronicle at the time, Peterson said that USDA inspectors had previously found the area to be safe. "Nothing in recent inspection reports gave me reason to believe there was anything wrong with the exhibit," she wrote.

Three years later, animal care staff clashed with Peterson [over the care of a Patas monkey](#) with a debilitating tumor on its face. When the staff decided it was time to euthanize the animal, Peterson disagreed, according to Sherwood, the former keeper. She said the CEO's decision [caused suffering](#) by delaying the procedure for almost a week. "She has no animal background, then she's making the final decisions on (an animal's) health. That's just crazy," Sherwood said in a recent interview.

In a statement to the Chronicle at the time, Peterson said, "There was no delay. The protocol and process is based on review by the zoo's team of medical and behavioral advisers."

Following the incident, a USDA inspector found two "noncritical" instances of the zoo being out of compliance, including lacking an attending veterinarian during the month when the monkey grew ill, which "could be detrimental to the welfare of the animals." The report stated that zoo veterinarians "do not currently have the adequate authority to make animal welfare decisions regarding humane euthanasia of animals."

In August 2018, in another incident not previously reported, former keeper Cassianni said zookeepers had a frightening experience with an animal in the same "code red" category as the grizzly bear: a 9-year-old male gorilla named Hasani.

Cassianni said she was working in the gorilla building with a co-worker when she heard him say, "Hasani, no!" She turned and saw the 200-pound ape pulling a hydraulic door open several inches, an incident she recorded in a zookeeper log. The keepers were able to distract Hasani and move him safely to another space, Cassianni said. Later, a technician found that the door had malfunctioned because it was leaking hydraulic fluid, according to zookeeper logs, which also showed that the same door had malfunctioned and

been repaired twice in the previous months.

If the zookeepers had been in an adjacent space where they often worked and Hasani had been able to open the door fully, “It could have been catastrophic,” Cassianni said.

The zoo did not comment on the incident.

Maintenance is a constant challenge for almost all zoos, said Kristina Horback, an associate professor at the UC Davis Department of Animal Science, who was not familiar with specific incidents at the San Francisco Zoo. “In zoos I’ve worked with, they’re always having something broken,” she said. However, she said, “Anything related to gating or security? That would be a priority for fixing.”

Cramped quarters for orangutans



Part of the orangutan exhibit is seen in March. A former zookeeper, Melissa Lory, said that the passageway — the one to the right in this photo — was the only outdoor access for six months for the male orangutan that arrived in 2019. Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

Lory’s first job when she arrived at the zoo in 2019 was to care for a pair of orangutans, a male and female named Ollie and Amoi (later renamed Berani and Judy), that had just been brought in from other zoos. They’d been placed in a primate exhibit built in the 1950s, where they would stay for two years before renovations for the space were complete, according to zoo records.

The facility’s low ceilings did not leave enough room for the orangutans to swing with their arms, which is their natural form of movement, said Lory and Cassianni. Cassianni described the indoor facility as dark and littered with rat feces, requiring keepers to set traps for the rodents each night. During their first six months there, the orangutans’ only outdoor access was to overhead walkways, according to Lory. That is where [the male, Ollie](#), spent most of his time, and where discarded food, tangled blankets and his waste piled up, Lory said.



Ollie the orangutan, later renamed Berani, sits in an overhead walkway at the San Francisco Zoo in 2019. Melissa Lory, who cared for him that

year, said that he spent most of his time on the walkway during his first six months at the zoo, and discarded food, tangled blankets and his waste piled up.

Courtesy photo

“We were all just floored that the zoo thought this was an adequate space for those animals,” Cassianni said.

In December 2019, the orangutans were able to start alternating use of an outdoor yard with the chimpanzees, zoo records show. It would be another 18 months until they had their own yard, Lory said. However, she said, sharing the yard was problematic because the orangutans could go there only a few times a week, when the chimps would lose access to the space.

Poole shared the report from a February 2020 USDA inspection of the chimpanzees’ housing, which the zoo passed. He did not comment specifically on the orangutans’ situation. In her June 2021 newsletter, when Peterson announced the opening of the orangutans’ yard, she wrote that construction had been delayed by the pandemic.

“Like all zoos, the San Francisco Zoo continuously works to update all of our exhibits to ensure the best habitat for our animals,” Poole said in an email.

Ashe, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums CEO, said it’s fairly common for zoos to keep animals in temporary housing. “Zoos are constantly in a state of improvement,” he said, speaking generally. “But the same standards apply.”

The Oakland Zoo does not bring in animals from other zoos until their exhibit is fully built, said Colleen Kinzley, Oakland’s vice president of animal care, conservation and research. The exception is when the zoo accepts animals that need immediate rescue, such as a case of a black bear and her cubs, which would have otherwise been euthanized and were kept in a temporary space for several months.



Visitors stop at

the orangutan exhibit in the San Francisco Zoo on March 15. The orangutans’ yard was opened three years ago after construction delays during the pandemic.

Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

“Normally we know what the timing is going to be, so we are ready for them,” she said. “We don’t bring them in if we’re not ready.”

Last June, the San Francisco Zoo had another serious incident previously unknown to the public, again involving a door, when a 1-year-old Magellanic penguin named Handy Harry was killed in the river otter exhibit where he lived.

“While securing the penguins at the old otter pool inside for pool cleaning, the guillotine shift door slipped and hit ‘Handy Harry.’ He quickly declined and was rushed to the hospital,” read the zookeeper log that day. “Died at the hospital.”

Handy Harry had made his debut 10 months earlier at the zoo’s annual [March of the Penguins](#) for new chicks. The heavy door, which moves vertically, was intended for larger animals, and its placement made it difficult for keepers to see the penguins as they passed under it, said one of the former employees who spoke on the condition of anonymity.



The old river otter exhibit, with a shuttered “guillotine” door, is seen at the San Francisco Zoo on March 15. A 1-year-old penguin named Handy Harry died last year after the door fell on him. The rest of the penguins have since been moved from the otter exhibit to the main penguin colony.

Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

The zoo’s bird department lacked full staffing one-third of the time that month but was fully staffed that day, according to union records.

Poole said in emails that the ratio of birds and reptiles to keepers at the zoo has decreased to 33.1 animals per keeper, compared with 35.7 five years ago. He said Handy Harry’s death was discussed at a monthly meeting between members of the zoo board and San Francisco Recreation and Park commissioners.

“The S.F. Zoo proudly maintains one of the largest and most successful breeding colon(ies) of Magellanic penguins under human care,” Poole said. “While we celebrate our successes, we acknowledge a rare and unfortunate incident in June 2023 when we lost a juvenile.”

In February, the remaining penguins in the river otter exhibit were moved to the main penguin colony, zookeeper logs show.



A group of visitors watch the San Francisco Zoo's grizzly bears in 2022. One of the bears chased a zookeeper last year and entered a zookeeper space after the door to her den was inadvertently left open.

Brontë Wittpenn/The Chronicle

In the grizzly bear grotto, each of the two dens has a sliding door that is operated from the adjoining keeper's room. A metal bar slides one way to close the door and the other way to open it, allowing keepers to manipulate the door from a safe distance.

At the time Kiona got out of her den last spring, the door's lock could be fastened while the bar was in the open position, said Hallman, who was told about the locking system by employees, and Shields. The space was dark, Hallman said, making it more difficult to see if the bar was in the closed position.

The morning Kiona got out, the keeper had fastened the locking mechanism while failing to close the door of the den, and a second person who was assigned to check the door also did not notice that it was open before leaving the area, said Shields, who worked at the zoo for 17 months.

The zoo initially suspended the keeper who ran from the bear and fired the other employee, but after the union filed grievances, both employees were suspended for two weeks without pay, said Hallman, who represented the employees in disciplinary proceedings afterward.

The zookeepers involved declined to be interviewed. The zoo would not provide any reports on the incident, citing employee confidentiality.

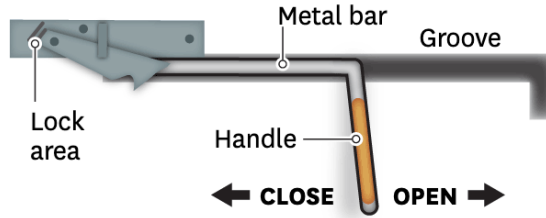
In the months following the incident, the zoo made changes to the bear enclosure, including painting the walls a lighter color and spray-painting new "Open" and "Closed" signs to help keepers see clearly if the door is secure, according to zookeeper logs and employees. New latches now ensure the keepers close the den doors before locking them, said Hallman, who was told about the changes by union members.

Changes to doors on bear dens

After an incident in which a door was mistakenly left open and a bear chased a zookeeper, the zoo made changes that reduced confusion about the position of the doors.

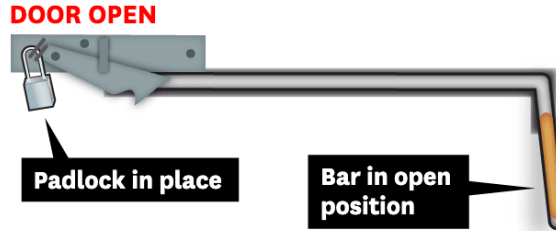
HOW THEY WORK

The door to the bear den is operated by a mechanism from an adjoining room. To open or close the door, a zookeeper slides a metal bar horizontally through a groove built into the wall.



BEFORE THE CHANGE

The door's lock could be fastened even with the bar — and thus the door — in the open position.



AFTER THE CHANGE

New latches were installed on the wall to make sure that keepers close the den doors before locking them. The walls were also painted with new labels to aid recognition.



Graphic: Todd

Trumbull/The Chronicle • Source: Chronicle reporting

The zoo did not comment on changes made to the enclosure.

Four months after the incident, in September, USDA inspectors made a surprise visit to the zoo following an anonymous complaint, department spokesperson Andre Bell said in an email. The USDA provided the Chronicle a copy of the complaint — which was made by Shields about the bear incident — as well as the resulting inspection report.

The inspector did not find any compliance issues and wrote, “the incident was described as a personnel issue.” The report said the keeper involved would no longer work with the zoo’s most dangerous animals. “The inspectors found staff members working in areas with ‘code red animals’ with limited experience,” the report stated, “(but) the staff working in those areas had completed the training necessary and were found to be competent to be working in those areas.”

Shields said the zoo did not report the incident to the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, though it was required to do so. The zoo did not comment on this allegation.

“If a keeper ended up in a space where a dangerous animal was, we would expect a report,” said Ashe, the association’s CEO. He declined to say whether or not the San Francisco Zoo had made a report, but said in a statement that reports are required “anytime a dangerous animal escapes primary containment, or accesses an area it is not authorized to be in, regardless of whether or not the animal reaches a public area.” Ashe said it would be unusual for the public not to find out about an animal escape.

Poole said the bear did not leave its containment area. When asked to explain that statement, given that the bear appeared in the keeper area in the video, he did not answer.

About six weeks after Kiona got out of her den, Shields said, a zoo guest approached him. On the day of the incident, the guest and his wife said they had seen a keeper running who told them to leave the zoo grounds because a bear had gotten out. Why, the guest wanted to know, had he never heard anything about it on the news?

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Link: <https://www.sfchronicle.com/sf/article/san-francisco-zoo-investigation-19410379.php>
[BAY AREA//SAN FRANCISCO](#)

Chronicle's S.F. Zoo investigation sparks concern, surprise among city officials

By [Tara Duggan](#), [Megan Fan Muncie](#)



April 20, 2024

An overhead passageway is seen at the orangutan exhibit at the San Francisco Zoo.
Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

Members of a San Francisco Zoo advisory committee expressed surprise and concern at issues of worker safety and animal welfare raised in a [Chronicle investigation](#).

In an email to the Chronicle, Larry Mazzola, chair of the city's Joint Zoo Committee, called for a full investigation into the accusations.

The Chronicle report, published Wednesday, outlined complaints raised by 20 current and former employees and detailed troubling recent incidents, including a harrowing chase of a zookeeper by a grizzly bear and the death of a young penguin that was, according to keeper logs, struck by a "guillotine" door. Employees said the zoo's upper management did not listen to their concerns.

The Joint Zoo Committee discussed the Chronicle's findings Thursday during its monthly meeting. The advisory group is made up of zoo representatives and members of the Recreation and Park Commission, the Commission of Animal Control and Welfare, and the San Francisco Zoological Society board, which runs the zoo.

Later that day, the 95-year-old institution was in the spotlight again when Mayor London Breed announced that [China would lend](#)

[giant pandas](#) to the zoo for the first time in decades, likely by next year.

Mazzola said he was surprised to learn about most of the issues in the Chronicle's report. He said he would invite Tanya Peterson, CEO and executive director of the zoo, and Melinda Dunn, the Zoological Society's new board chair, to attend the committee's June meeting to answer questions about the article's findings.

In particular, Mazzola, a business manager with United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters Local 38, said he was concerned about allegations regarding worker safety and training.

"I want to make sure that the workers are being heard," Mazzola said in the meeting. "Worker safety and the way that workers are being treated are the No. 1 priority, along with keeping the animals safe. That's what this is all about."

"There were some pretty serious allegations in the article," said Jane Tobin, secretary of the Commission of Animal Control and Welfare. She added, "I'm not sure about the path forward."

On Friday, the zoo posted a [statement on social media](#) saying that the Chronicle's report "misrepresented information and included many inaccurate facts." The Chronicle asked the zoo to specify what facts it found to be inaccurate.

In an ensuing email, board chair Dunn said "the evidence at the time (of the penguin's death) was inconclusive as to the cause of death."

The Chronicle obtained the agenda from the July 20, 2023, Joint Zoo Committee meeting. On the report to the committee listing the five animals that died in the previous month, "head trauma" is noted next to the deceased penguin.

Much of the rest of the email details items that were mentioned in the Chronicle report, including the fact that the zoo regularly passes inspections. Said Dunn: "We also have numerous safety protocols to ensure the safety of our staff, as well as safety and welfare committees responsible for reviewing staff concerns, evaluating the situation and resolving any issues. We are proud of the San Francisco Zoo and our teams."

While San Francisco owns the zoo and its animals, the Zoological Society is responsible for managing day-to-day operations, passing needed inspections, doing maintenance and making capital improvements, according to its lease. The Joint Zoo Committee is informed of animal deaths, gives approval to animal acquisitions and approves the nonprofit's operating budget and capital improvements above \$50,000.

"We have to ask more questions. We have to have answers if the public asks us, or whoever," Mazzola said in the meeting.

Corey Hallman, a representative of the zoo's labor union, said that the union would meet with the Zoological Society board soon to talk about issues raised in the Chronicle's report, many of which the union has raised previously.

Tobin suggested looking into what other zoos consider best practice. She specifically pointed to the Oakland Zoo's policy of bringing in new animals only when their habitat is complete. Former employees at the San Francisco Zoo said that a pair of orangutans were brought in to live in an exhibit for two years before it was renovated.

In a phone interview, Supervisor Myrna Melgar, whose district includes the zoo, would not comment on the Chronicle's findings, but said she welcomed the news about pandas coming to the zoo.

"I definitely see the benefits for the zoo and for the city," Melgar said. "I hope that the zoo puts its best foot forward."

Link: <https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/zoo-investigation-19446885.php>

BAY AREA

San Francisco Zoo: Internal investigation underway amid mismanagement allegations

By [Tara Duggan](#)

May 10, 2024



Tanya Peterson,

CEO and executive director of the San Francisco Zoo, received a vote of no confidence from the zoo's union. An outside lawyer has been tapped to look into problems at the zoo, which has been beset by allegations of mismanagement and concerns over worker safety and animal welfare.

Thomas Webb/The Chronicle 2011

The organization that runs the San Francisco Zoo is conducting an internal investigation, an action that follows [a Chronicle report](#) that detailed employee allegations of mismanagement, safety lapses and animal welfare concerns, as well as a recent vote of no confidence in CEO and executive director Tanya Peterson by the zoo's union.

The investigation comes just as San Francisco has begun preparations to host a pair of high-profile pandas from China at the zoo as soon as next year.

On Thursday, executive board members of the San Francisco Zoological Society, the nonprofit organization that runs the city-owned zoo, held a meeting with investigator Harriet Lipkin, a Washington, D.C.-based labor lawyer, and members of the zoo's union, according to sources familiar with the meeting. Melinda Dunn, the new chair of the Zoological Society board, has also encouraged employees to contact the investigator directly to discuss their concerns, emails obtained by the Chronicle show.

"Engaging in due diligence is a fundamental aspect of board governance and should not be misconstrued as a negative reflection of the zoo's leadership or its operational procedures," Dunn said in a statement to the Chronicle.

Exactly who or what is being investigated is unclear. It is also unclear exactly when the investigation began. When asked for details, Dunn did not answer, but said, "The Zoological Society board is dedicated to collaborating with its leadership team and our labor partner to ensure a positive work environment for all our employees at the zoo. In alignment with this commitment and in cooperation with the union, we are utilizing several channels for gathering information."

Thursday's meeting was scheduled after 97% of the zoo's union members cast a vote of no-confidence in Peterson in early April,

according to an April 17 letter that union representative Corey Hallman sent to membership and was obtained by the Chronicle. A statement accompanying the vote alleged that Peterson had created a 'toxic work environment' and that the zoo suffered from staffing shortages and safety problems, such as concerns about the security of proposed housing for a new jaguar, among other issues.

Peterson, who has led the zoo since 2008, did not respond to specific allegations raised by employees, but said in a statement to the Chronicle: "I fully endorse initiatives aimed at fostering positive dialogue and communication. I take immense pride in our dedicated employees and consider it an honor to collaborate with them in advancing the zoo's mission."

Hallman declined to comment when contacted for this story. But in the April 17 letter, Hallman wrote that Dunn had informed the union that it was "conducting an investigation into the issues the union has raised." The Chronicle's investigation into the zoo was published online April 17.

Separately, Larry Mazzola, the chair of an advisory group within the Recreation and Park Commission called the Joint Zoo Committee, said he is doing his own research into similar issues. After the Chronicle published its article, which detailed concerns about safety, zoo management and animal welfare from 20 current and former employees, Mazzola [said he would invite](#) Peterson and Dunn to the committee's June meeting, which is public, to discuss them.

Mazzola said he is "investigating these issues" in preparation for the June meeting.

"My goal is to have all of the facts out on the table with reasonable solutions so we can make the S.F. Zoo the best place to work for the employees, and the best place to live for the animals," he said in an email.

The San Francisco Zoo has also been in the media spotlight since Mayor London Breed announced last month that she had secured the loan of a [pair of pandas](#) for the zoo from China, due to arrive in 2025. The zoo will spend an estimated \$25 million to build housing for the bears and potentially pay \$1 million a year for the loan of the animals.

Breed spokesperson Parisa Safarzadeh said the mayor is focused on construction preparation and fundraising for the panda's arrival, which she called a multiagency effort. "The S.F. Zoo is one of the city's most prized attractions," Safarzadeh said in a statement. She added that the mayor "supports the process actively in play for workers to report all concerns and raise issues. This process is happening as it should, and the mayor will continue to monitor all developments."

In addition to the no-confidence union vote in early April, a group of 15 self-described nonunion staff members emailed Dunn anonymously last month to share their concerns about issues raised in the Chronicle's report and other complaints, including "many years of inadequate leadership" at the zoo, according to a copy of the email obtained by the Chronicle. Peterson did not respond to a request to comment on the letter's statement on zoo leadership.

In response to the email, Dunn said she appreciated them sharing their views and wrote, "We want to hear your concerns, suggestions and thoughts for the future."

Dunn also wrote that Lipkin, [senior counsel](#) at DLA Piper who specializes in hospitality and leisure, was "scheduling interviews with individuals with first-hand knowledge of the allegations, as necessary to conduct her investigation. Her charge is to conduct an unbiased investigation, without revealing the identity of her reliable sources."

Earlier this year, the board also offered zoo employees a new online portal to report concerns. Dunn said that some kind of employee hotline had been in place since 2008.

The recent vote of no-confidence comes a decade after a similar one also raised concerns about Peterson's leadership.

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Link: <https://www.sfchronicle.com/sf/article/zoo-pandas-exhibits-19432033.php>
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Pandas at the S.F. Zoo? Some say it should fix 'dilapidated' conditions first

By [Tara Duggan](#), [Michael Barba](#)



May 14, 2024

Visitors walk past the newly constructed snow leopard enclosure at the San Francisco Zoo last Tuesday.
Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

Three years ago, the San Francisco Zoo enthusiastically shared plans to convert an old sea lion exhibit into a new habitat for a pair of Andean condors.

The exhibit was supposed to open by last year, but today, a banner advertising the "future home of Andean Condor" hangs in front of an overgrown lot. While the birds were brought to the zoo eight years ago, the only sign of progress on their future home is that the sea lions' former swimming pool is now filled with concrete.

The stalled condor habitat is one of several recent infrastructure projects at the zoo that have faced delays or remain unfinished, raising questions about whether the institution is equipped to take on its most ambitious project in decades: hosting a pair of giant pandas.

Under a tentative agreement reached by [Mayor London Breed](#) last month, the [zoo plans to build housing for the pandas](#) due from China in 2025. The project comes with an estimated price tag of up to [\\$25 million for housing alone](#), including the \$3 million to \$5 million needed to construct a temporary home for the bears while a permanent enclosure is built.



Weeds grow out

of the former sea lion pool where plans call for the Andean condor exhibit to be housed at the San Francisco Zoo. Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

While the zoo seeks to accomplish both at the same time, more than a dozen people with deep connections to the zoo, ranging from zookeepers to a major donor, told the Chronicle that the nearly century-old institution should consider fixing [its aging facilities](#) before taking on the internationally watched project. Some worried that getting the bears would divert attention and resources away from doing basic repairs and building exhibits for other animals, some of which have been housed in temporary facilities for years while construction is underway.

John McNellis, a longtime zoo donor, called facilities at the zoo “sadly dilapidated.”

“The \$20 million it would cost to build a new panda enclosure might be better spent in bringing our zoo back into pristine, first-class condition,” McNellis wrote in an email.

McNellis hoped that the panda gift would inspire the city to increase its annual financial support of the zoo, which has been set around \$4 million since 1993, to at least \$10 million, “so that the zoo can complete the long overdue repairs and capital improvements to its buildings, landscape and infrastructure.” (Such an increase could be a challenge to realize: San Francisco is expected to face [a nearly \\$800 million budget deficit](#) in the coming two fiscal years.)

“Ideally, however, we would have both a first-class zoo and a wonderful panda exhibit,” McNellis added.

Vitus Leung, deputy director at the nonprofit San Francisco Zoological Society, which operates the city-owned zoo, said in an email that the zoo “remains committed to supporting all of our planned projects, including improvements to some of our current animal habitat



A sign informs visitors of plans for the future Andean condor habitat that was once home to the S.F. Zoo's sea lion exhibit. Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

"We are very grateful to our donors whose funds support these ongoing efforts," Leung said. "We also look forward to adding new donors who are excited to support the San Francisco Zoo as we prepare for the momentous arrival of the giant pandas."

Parisa Safarzadeh, a spokesperson for Breed, said the mayor is working closely with officials from the city, zoo and China to ensure the zoo is ready to host the pandas next year.

The mayor "has and will remain at the core of this effort, and continues to lead across all agencies to ensure the panda's new habitat is a safe and healthy environment where they will thrive," said Safarzadeh, who called the zoo "one of the city's most prized attractions."

Ed Poole, former chair of the nonprofit board overseeing the zoo, said the zoo plans to work with the mayor's office to "ensure that fundraising initiatives bolster both the zoo's ongoing operations and existing projects while also facilitating the creation of a new habitat for pandas."

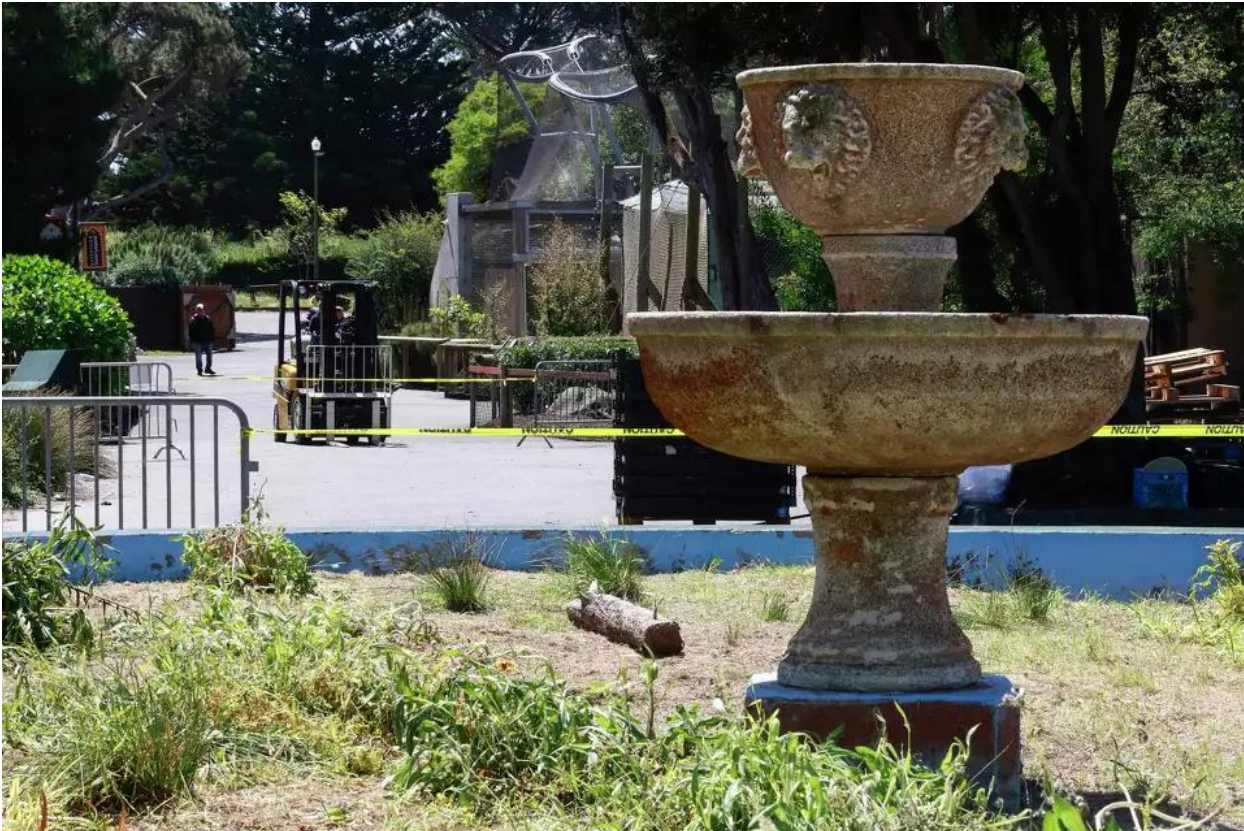
The panda enclosure would be the biggest project undertaken at the zoo in two decades, since [the opening of the \\$18 million African savanna habitat](#) in 2004 and the most ambitious since Tanya Peterson, the [controversial director](#) of the zoo, took the helm in 2008.

In recent years, smaller-scale projects such as the condor exhibit have gone beyond schedule, according to timelines zoo officials presented to the Recreation and Park Commission.

Some of those projects have also had to overcome design flaws, according to current and former employees who asked to remain anonymous because they still work in the zoo or in the field and fear professional repercussions. The Chronicle agreed not to name them in accordance with its [confidential sources policy](#).

"We already have so many projects that are halfway finished or not started," said one employee. "We barely have enough resources, and I feel like all of it will go to the pandas."

Leung attributed the delays on some projects to pandemic-related issues such as lower revenue and supply-chain disruptions, which he said led the zoo to "reassess our priorities and project timelines."



Caution tape keeps visitors out of an area under construction at the San Francisco Zoo, while weeds grow inside an unmaintained fountain.

Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

Brad Hange, a former zookeeper with the San Francisco Zoo whose 30-year career included five years at Washington D.C.'s National Zoo when it had pandas from China, said he is also concerned about San Francisco's new panda project.

"It's a shiny new object, and directors love shiny new objects," he said. "They would rather put money into building a new exhibit and bringing a new lovable animal into the zoo, rather than putting money into an 80-year-old exhibit."

One delayed improvement was the \$1.5 million expansion of the zoo's snow leopard exhibit. A month before the pandemic began, Peterson [announced plans to complete](#) the project by summer 2020, but it didn't open until early 2022. Another delayed project is the Lipman Family Madagascar Center, underway near the center of the zoo housing animals from the island such as lemurs and a catlike carnivore called a fossa. The project, funded with a \$7 million gift to the zoo from donor Barry Lipman and his family, broke ground in 2018 and is not yet completed.

As with the condors, the San Francisco Zoo recently brought in several animals from other zoos before the work on their exhibit spaces had begun; workers said this practice is not always good for the animals. Unlike San Francisco, the Oakland Zoo has a policy of receiving new animals only after their enclosures are complete, with the exception of animals in need of immediate rescue.

Construction delays have meant animals in San Francisco have spent even longer in temporary and at times subpar housing than originally intended, workers



said.

Workers are building a stone circle as part of a construction project on the Lipman Family Madagascar Center.
Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

Poole, the former zoo board chair, pushed back in an email. He said assertions suggesting that the zoo's exhibits, whether permanent or temporary, "fail to meet the needs of our animals are entirely unfounded."

Poole noted the zoo is regularly inspected by outside regulators.

In a recent Chronicle investigation into [worker safety and animal welfare](#) issues at the zoo, former zookeepers described how a pair of orangutans brought to the zoo in 2019 were put in a 1950s-era cement enclosure — without enough room for them to swing with their arms and with limited outdoor space, they said — for two years while the exhibit was being renovated.

Other rare animals that have remained in limbo include some brought in for the Madagascar Center. They include a male fossa that has lived in temporary housing for the past six years. Several Malagasy amphibians and reptiles acquired for the center in 2017 — such as a Henkel's leaf-tailed gecko, day gecko and a Sambava tomato frog — died before ever being put on view, according to zoo records.

The zoo did not respond to questions about the fossa living in temporary housing or about the other animals dying before the center opened. Leung said all animals at the zoo are housed in accordance with standards set by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, an accreditation organization, regardless of whether they are recently brought to the zoo or are housed out of sight from the public.

Shortly before the pandemic, Peterson told the Recreation and Park Commission in February 2020 that she hoped to complete the Madagascar project by the time the zoo completed its reaccreditation process with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. That process was completed in early 2022.



The

fossa exhibit is part of the Lipman Family Madagascar Center, currently undergoing construction at the San Francisco Zoo. Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

But the first phase of the project, which includes a giant replica baobab tree and an expanded habitat for a female fossa, wasn't completed until 2023. The second phase, which includes a 9,000-square-foot garden and a new lemur habitat, is still underway.

In his email, Leung said the Madagascar Center faced "COVID-related issues and other matters that are now resolved." He did not say when it would be completed.

Former employees said they noticed that progress on the Madagascar Center slowed down when the zoo began focusing on other initiatives, such as renovating an indoor habitat for its chimpanzees and working on the orangutan exhibit.

"When they would start new projects, an existing project would be put on hold and they would keep redirecting attention to the new project," said a former employee. That worker was concerned that type of situation would be repeated, with the pandas taking attention away from existing projects. Unlike those projects, though, the panda construction will be closely watched by China.

Lipman, the zoo donor whose family the center is named after, acknowledged in an interview that the Madagascar project encountered challenges. He said the zoo quickly demolished parts of an old primate center to make space for the project, leaving an "unsightly" hole in the ground, but ran into supply-chain issues during the pandemic. Still, Lipman said he never expected the project to be completed "overnight."

Lipman said he believed the zoo is sufficiently prepared to build an enclosure for the pandas, as long as it has enough money and can find a good architect.

"It's really exciting," he said.

In addition to delays, design flaws have come up in some recent projects when employees with animal-care knowledge were not consulted during planning stages, workers said.

Joe Knobbe, the zoo's manager of primate exhibits from 2016 to 2021, said the mesh that the zoo planned to use on the

lemur habitat for the Madagascar Center had larger holes than recommended and could allow baby lemurs to escape, putting them at risk from predators like raccoons and seagulls.



seagull flies past a new baobab tree sculpture near the Lipman Family Madagascar Center at the S.F. Zoo.
Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

Knobbe said he was often not included in discussions during the planning of the Madagascar Center, despite his extensive experience with lemurs.

“They had gone ahead with some design features without even running them by someone who had worked with lemurs for more than 30 years,” said Knobbe, now deputy director of the Lee Richardson Zoo in Garden City, Kan. “It frustrated the heck out of me.”

Another exhibit design issue: After construction on the snow leopard expansion, a worker said they realized the project enclosure lacked shade or a hiding place for the animal, which had to be addressed.

The zoo did not comment on the alleged design problems on either project.

As construction for the Madagascar Center continues six years after it began, some animals that were displaced by the project are still in less than ideal housing, workers said.

In a far-off corner of the zoo, a troupe of endangered Francois’ langurs that were moved in 2018 live inside an old-school concrete exhibit.

Like the promised pandas, the monkeys, which are black with distinctive white mutton chops, were originally given to the zoo by China. The zoo would not say whether the exhibit is their permanent home, or whether the monkeys will someday enjoy a new enclosure.

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