



LIONS AND TIGERS AND...CARS?

When zoos live in urban parks, the parking footprint often gobbles up beloved green space.

By **PETER HARNIK** and **ALEXANDRA HIPLE**



IN MEMPHIS'S Overton Park, parking is a zoo. Really.

The story is the same in San Diego's Balboa Park and Rochester's Seneca Park, Houston's Hermann Park and Saint Louis's Forest Park. In fact, practically every major city park with a zoo faces overwhelming and destructive pressure from automobile traffic. In some places it's the attempted gobbling up of green places for parking spaces; in others it's poor design of parking in the first place, and in still others it's the standard school-bus storage conundrum.

Great cities almost always have an iconic park, and very often that park houses a zoo; of the 75 most visited zoos in the U.S., 42 are within a city park. It stands to reason: in the beginning, most zoos (short for "zoological park") began as a small collection of caged exotic species, intended as just one more attraction for visitors. Portland's Oregon Zoo began with one "she grizzly," gifted in 1888 by a citizen who had tired of upkeep. It was put into Washington Park, and the rest is local history. The San Diego Zoo was created to provide a sanctuary for animals that were left from the Panama-California Exposition that took place in Balboa Park.

Later, everywhere, expansions have multiplied, thanks to the movement to create exhibits that mimic large natural habitats.

While early zoos might have taken up only a small portion of a park, or were seamlessly integrated into the overall architecture, they have since become major entities of their own. In San Diego, "The zoo is often seen as the real 800-pound gorilla in the room," says Thomas Herrera-Mishler, president of the Balboa Park Conservancy.

David Rice, director of architecture and planning for the San Diego Zoo, says ruefully, "We're a conservation organization, so it's unfortunate that we are also married to the automobile."

Space squeeze

Memphis is ground zero in the war—or maybe "zero ground" from the park perspective. While other cities battle over pavement, in Memphis the zoo leadership has gradually since the 1990s commandeered the park's ceremonial lawn—designed back in 1901 by world-famous landscape architect George Kessler—for cars. For years, on pretty days, nearly zero percent of Overton Park's historic Greensward was available for strolling, picnicking, sunbathing, playing ball, or doing anything else. Rather than a sea of tranquility, the lawn served as an ocean of traffic—the overflow lot for patrons of the Memphis Zoo.

Ironically, Overton Park has been saved from cars once before. In the 1960s the Tennessee Department of Transportation planned to run Interstate 40 through the center of the park until it was finally stopped by the U.S. Supreme Court in a landmark 1971 decision, *Citizens to Preserve Overton Park v. Volpe*. The ruling was so groundbreaking in protecting parks all over the country that it landed Overton Park on the list of *10 Parks That Changed America* in a recent PBS television retrospective.

Today's battle of Overton Park was born out of the Memphis Zoo's shortage of parking and its lack of a contingency plan for overflow days. As the conflict grew increasingly heated, park supporters formed protest groups such as Save the Greensward and Get Off Our Lawn. The zoo erected gates and stanchions on the Greensward, and the Overton Park Conservancy planted trees to protect its property. When the zoo cut down the 27 new trees in January 2016, the city's new mayor called for mediation; when that didn't work, he came up with his own compromise.

The Overton Park struggle is extreme but not unique. At the San Diego Zoo—tied for busiest in the nation with 3.5 million annual visitors—parking is problem number one.

"This is something both the leadership and the citizens are constantly thinking about," says Rice. Construction of a 650-space, multistory garage for employees has helped, and a much larger upgrade is in the works. The Park Boulevard Promenade is conceived as a 4,800-space underground facility with a pedestrian mall on its roof—a great "park above/park below" solution.

The plan includes removing the existing 3,000-space aboveground lot, which will allow the zoo to expand animal exhibits onto part of that area. The garage will be convenient to a number of popular institutions within the park, so it will ease parking pains for many institutions, including the zoo. With a price tag of \$300 million, it has been approved but awaits full funding.

The promenade concept is perhaps the only way the zoo can expand. “People have an almost visceral reaction” against zoo growth, says Balboa Park Conservancy’s Herrera-Mishler, who is sympathetic to the squeeze the zoo is feeling. He says the two parties have an “open dialogue” and work together on planning matters within the park.

The Saint Louis Zoo is planning even bigger—in fact, thinking right out of its box. Over a 25-year period parking will be moved beyond Forest Park entirely and across Interstate 64, allowing the zoo to replace cars with animals.

A pedestrian bridge will be built over the freeway, connecting to the parking and other new amenities. The price tag: \$500 million.

Taming the parking beast

But the ultimate solution is through mass transportation. When Houston was planning its light-rail system, many people—including staff at the parks and recreation department itself—pushed for stations serving the park and zoo. They succeeded. “We were strong proponents,” said Rick Dewees, assistant parks director. “At peak season the zoo gets upwards of 20,000 people a day.”

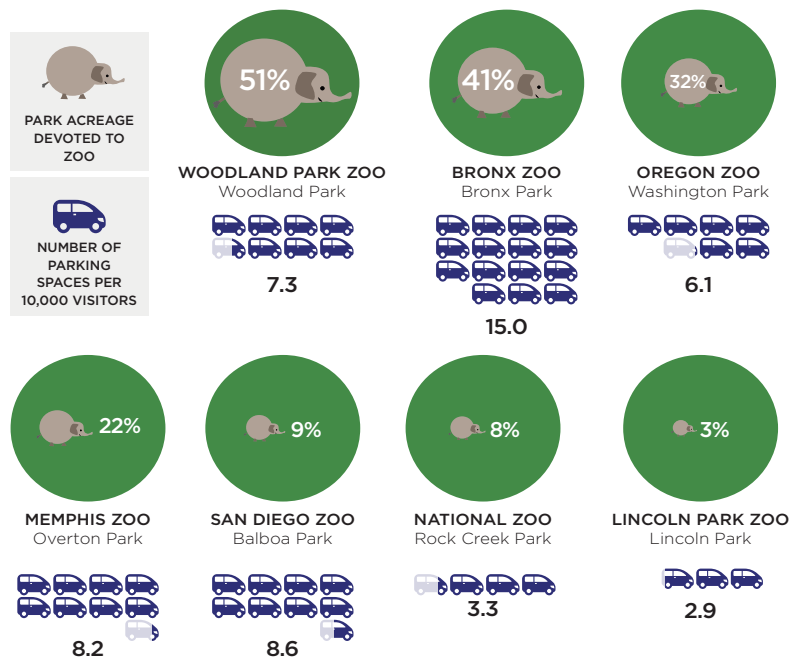
Zoos in Washington, D.C., and the Bronx have their own subway stops, and other places offer shuttle service from remote locations. Although some zoo directors have qualms about shuttles, at least three cities have made them work: Saint Paul, Minnesota; Portland, Oregon; and Buffalo, New York.

The Saint Paul Park and Recreation Department, which is in the unusual position of directly running both the park and the zoo, operates five shuttles between Como Regional Park and the large (and mostly unused) Minnesota state fairgrounds about a mile away. The system, which runs on a 10-minute headway, was initiated through a \$1.2-million federal transit grant and costs the department \$150,000 annually. Both parking and the shuttle itself are free. In addition, a second city bus line was routed to service the park, in no small part due to the insistence of the park department.

“We’re focused on doing what we do better, not getting bigger,” says zoo director Michelle Furrer. Moreover, Furrer treats the transit journey as an integral part of the zoo visit, and each shuttle is decorated as a different zoo animal. “The whole zoo experience starts as soon as you get out of your car,” she adds, “not once you go through the entrance.”

TAMING PARKING IN CITY ZOOS

A zoo can be a small part of a park (Chicago) or occupy more than half (Seattle). But the number of parking spaces is a concern everywhere.



PARKING SPACES PER ZOO VISITORS

| CITY | ZOO | ANNUAL ATTENDANCE | NO. OF PARKING SPACES |
|------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Chicago | Lincoln Park Zoo | 3,500,000 | 1,019 |
| San Diego | San Diego Zoo | 3,500,000 | 3,000 |
| Saint Louis | Saint Louis Zoo | 3,070,000 | 1,420 |
| Washington, D.C. | National Zoo | 2,500,000 | 824 |
| Houston | Houston Zoo | 2,376,000 | 1,200 |
| New York | Bronx Zoo | 1,863,000 | 2,800 |
| Saint Paul | Como Park Zoo and Conservatory | 1,773,000 | 2,188 |
| Portland | Oregon Zoo | 1,625,000 | 989 |
| Seattle | Woodland Park Zoo | 1,276,000 | 929 |
| Memphis | Memphis Zoo | 1,061,000 | 875 |
| New York | Central Park Zoo | 1,016,000 | 0 |

SOURCE: THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND AND THE ASSOCIATION OF ZOOS AND AQUARIUMS
ELEPHANTS BY WENDY WALMAN; CARS THINKSTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

A similar, though smaller, system now used in Buffalo’s historic Delaware Park (designed by Frederick Law Olmsted) was born out of decades-long tension between the Buffalo Zoo and the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy. The shuttle program was piloted in 2015, spurred by yet another zoo attempt to build a parking lot (which would have resulted in the removal of up to 200 old-growth trees). The zoo was able to adapt a shuttle from a nonemergency medical transportation service that operates in the city, which was especially convenient because the bus already had a ramp and was roomy enough for strollers and families and other large groups.

Stephanie Crockatt, executive director of the conservancy, believes this is significant to the program’s success. She says that to really work, any system must be flexible enough to accommodate large groups and even wheelchairs. The shuttle picks up zoo-goers from certain hotels as well as transit stations, meaning that a percentage of cars don’t even enter the picture.

Working together, the zoo and the conservancy set about squeezing more parking spaces onto Delaware Park’s pavement without adding an extra square inch of asphalt. This included an agreement to allow temporary parking on park roadways during high-demand events (giving the zoo about 150 extra spots). Fi-



An enthusiastic crowd of more than 550 people gathered at the San Diego Zoo in May as part of the Centennial Community Celebration.

nally, a deal was reached with a nearby church for space after services—a good solution, says Crockatt, because the zoo doesn’t get really busy until after noon on Sundays anyway.

The Buffalo program is very modest—the free shuttle runs only on summer weekends—but, thinking creatively, sharing facilities, and cooperating have saved the park and kept the zoo happy.

Furthest ahead of the curve in this disputatious arena may be Portland, Oregon’s Washington Park. There, a group called Explore Washington Park is dedicated almost exclusively to improving the visitor’s navigation experience. Formed as a transportation management association, it operates a free, park-wide shuttle that brings visitors not only to the zoo but also to the Japanese Garden, the Arboretum, and other attractions, and also services the nearby light-rail station.

The economics of the shuttle work because Washington Park has metered parking, a rarity in urban greenspace management. The meters, installed in 2014, generated \$2 million in their first year of operation, with all revenue going directly to the park. Beyond the subsidized shuttle, the money paid for new paving, improved signage and crosswalks, and strengthened security.

Compromise in Memphis

The explosion in Memphis had actually been building for 30 years, according to Lissa Thompson, a landscape architect with Ritchie Smith Associates, who worked on the park’s master plan in the 1980s. “There were all kinds of traffic flow issues,” she says, “so it was agreed that parking on the grass could take place on a temporary, permitted, case-by-case basis. We all assumed that the zoo would come up with a permanent solution, but year after year it kept not happening.”

The battle was finally brought to an end through the intercession of Mayor Jim Strickland. The mayor’s solution, based on a detailed 2016 parking study commissioned by the Overton Park Conservancy, includes a complete redesign of the zoo’s existing parking to add more spaces (albeit cutting some trees in the process), paving a small portion of the park’s greensward for parking, adding hundreds of spaces along the formerly parking-free roadway outside the zoo, creating a new zoo front entrance away from the parking lot, and instituting shuttle service around the perimeter of the park.

Also, the zoo and the park conservancy have jointly committed to raise funds

for the construction of a multistory parking structure on zoo property.

“I maintain that Overton Park never had a parking problem,” says Chuck Flink, a consultant whose ideas provided the basis for the compromise. “What it has is a customer delivery problem.”

“The outcome,” Flink continues, “while not perfect, is a victory for the park and for George Kessler’s vision. With a new zoo entrance, enhanced transit options, and recognition of the need to deliver folks more efficiently to the front door, I’m hopeful that this will set a new course for Overton Park.”

It is not preordained that zoos and their parks must battle, nor does one institution have a greater claim to city resources than the other. Zoos can provide a huge boost for their regional economies: a 2012 study found that the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden had a total annual economic impact of \$143 million. The same goes for parks; the so-called “Central Park Effect” in New York is calculated at about \$1 billion in economic activity and revenue for the city.

Zoos are beloved by people of all ages and often are at the forefront of wildlife conservation work and research. Parks improve health and the environment, boost property values, and act as a tourist destination. Cities are proud of their parks, particularly of their large, iconic parks that house zoos.

If the customer delivery challenges can be solved—for parks and zoos—both sets of institutions can truly shine, as can the cities that contain them. ■

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