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From Megan Thomas <[REDACTED]>

Date Wed 4/29/2026 5:54 PM

To Hassina Adams <[REDACTED]>

Cc Spencer Berg <[REDACTED]>

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Thank you Andrew. And thank you members of the Legislature for being here and listening. I also want to thank all the Friends Board members who are here today, members of the Zoo past and present.

We are also here today to speak about some challenges we have faced in supporting the Zoo and in having a strong and affection partnership.

To be clear, our goal is a strong partnership wherein the Friends support the Zoo to function and thrive.

Unfortunately, we have not had a partnership for some time. That is largely because the County has used its authority and power to take advantage of the Friends, using the friends' success for its gain.

As Andrew mentioned, the Friends has been incredibly successful. We have fundraised money, ran impressive events that brought in funds, run a successful gift shop.

Unfortunately, the County has responded to this success not with the respect the Friends deserved, but by trying to find ways to use the Friends' success to benefit the County. More specifically, the aquarium.

On or about April 28, 2025, the Friends were approached - by the County with a request, would the Friends donate \$1 million dollars to the Aquarium project? The Friends were surprised by this bold request. The funds from donors and an endowment were not allocated for the Aquarium but for the Zoo. Many of those donations were tied to specific projects.

Nonetheless, being the team players they are, the Friends staff brought this request to the Board.

The Board had very significant concerns. They were concerned that this was not in line with our mission and that \$1 million is a large percentage of our funds.

When the Friends did not respond to this request. The County started to put immense pressure on the Friends. What followed was a campaign of bullying and retaliation.

First, the tone of meetings changed to being more hostile in nature. The County's interactions with the Friends were now marked by aggression and micromanagement.

Secondly, there was a memorandum of understanding that had already been negotiated and signed by our team in July 2025. Generally in the past, the edits to this document were minimal in nature. This was the case with the draft the friends signed in late 2025.

Then, the County refused to countersign the MOU and sought some aggressive changes including:

- 40% (up from 20%) of the membership dues payable to this County.
- Gifford Foundation Endowment - stated that this fund shall be used for programs and activities that have been approved by the Director of the Zoo under the supervision of the Commission or Parks and Recreation.
- Previously, interest from the fund supported education, now the interest was to be used for programs and activities that have been approved by the Director of the Zoo under the supervision of the Commissioner of Parks
- MOU was now to be updated annually (as opposed to every 5 years).

Then, the County started talking about sending the gift shop out for RFP. This is something that was never on the table before. WHY? The Friends depend on the income from the gift shop in their operations.

\*During a Board meeting on October 28, 2026, Brian Kelley made it clear there was a connection between MOU/RFP and the aquarium ask. He said if we acquiesced on the \$1m request, the other two items would become negotiable.

The County also started to discuss sending catering out for RFP.

The County started to make things very difficult for the Friends.

For example, the Friends applied for a grant and was awarded the grant. When the media picked this up, the County became very angry at the Friends. Again, this was a marked difference.

The County was razor-focused on removing all barriers to its access to the \$1m dollars as well as other funds from a "well-endowed partner."

The result was an extremely toxic environment for the Friends.

After Carrie Large, the Executive Director, moved on to a new role, with warning, the Zoo staff took over the office and locked the Friends out.

At this stage, we have no executive director and cannot hire one.

- Money is held up such that we cannot hire an executive director.
- There is no space for executive director.

Our requests

1. We need to be stabilized financially
  - We want the RFP for the gift shop awarded to the Friends and an agreement that this will not be sent back out for RFP gift shop.
  - The MOU that Carrie Large signed countersigned by the County ASAP.

On Fri, Apr 24, 2026 at 12:02 PM Hassina Adams <[REDACTED]> wrote:

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[REDACTED].