

I am concerned about the City's plan to outsource operation and maintenance of the Buttonwood Park Zoo to a private organization, as seen by the City of New Bedford's "RFI" that was issued last fall.

The reality is that the Zoological Society is trying to take over the zoo, without public involvement. Whether you agree they should or not, this should be on the ballot in November.

So far the Request for Information (RFI) was quietly posted on the City website. Only the Society answered the Request last fall. Their response highlights the problem with keeping this secret: The Society would have zero accountability to the public or the taxpayers. They would receive annual payments of about \$4 million a year for the next 5 years on a 20 year contract which includes capital improvement bond funds from the City taxpayers. In all, they wanted access to \$21.61 million of the taxpayers' money.

None of the Zoological Society Board members listed in the RFI are New Bedford taxpayers.

Their track record so far is poor. They raised nearly \$1 million/year for the past 5 years, but none of that goes to the City, the animals, zoo staff or maintenance. So where did the approximately \$4.5 million go?

The Society's Response to the RFI claims that they raised another \$2.5 million in private donations that was used to help build the Aquatic Center rehab, a playground in the zoo, and the red panda exhibit. However, they have refused to show exactly how it was spent. The City funded the exhibits under the CIP bond, and only used \$450,000 private donations for the rehab. So the playground cost \$2 million? Certainly the red panda exhibit did not. It was built by zoo staff. I watched them.

The Society also claims to have three funds established for additional projects, but did not provide the fund amounts. Yet when I made public records requests to find out how much they raised, I was told this was a private organization and they refused the requests.

At a time when the City shut down fire stations, costing lives and property, why would we do this?

Buttonwood Park and Buttonwood Park Zoo are public parkland. The transfer of any part of it plus committing \$21.61 million to a private organization should not only be public information, but it should go to the voters this fall as a ballot measure first. If the voters agree, it should be bid out as any public project of this magnitude would.

Please put this on the ballot in November for the taxpayers to vote on.

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