

Boston Pride For Zoo New England

The Governor of Massachusetts recently reduced Zoo New England's state budget from \$6.5m to \$2.5m, out of a total Zoo budget of around \$11m. Governor Patrick argues that financially things are tight in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and every public supported institution needs to tighten its belt.

The Zoo reacted by suggesting if their budget was cut, the zoo would have to close and responsibility for the closing the Zoos would fall to the State, who may have to euthanize 20% of the animals. Critics and the Governor came back and suggested this would not happen. But importantly, the state legislature decided to remove the cuts, so at the moment the Zoo is saved. However, the PR tactics used by the Zoo now mean that the relationship between the Governor's office and the Zoo may be strained. [Doug Haslam gave some PR insights](#) into how to navigate the next course of action for both the Zoo and Governor Patrick.

I was thinking that perhaps both the Governor and Zoo New England would benefit from presenting their cases to the public for budget tightening or budget increases with numbers in hand. Not just the zoo numbers but a comparison of financial data with other Zoos across the United States.

Just to be open about my writing about the zoo budget, my interest is to see the State funding for Zoo New England continue, as I argued in my first blog post about the public relations around the potential zoo closure, the discussion about the zoo should be about financials, what's the ROI of the Zoos to the wider economy, especially if the State is arguing that the reason for the reduction in budget is for budgetary reasons. If the Zoo can prove it is having a good economic impact there's less reason to reduce the budget.

Allen Nyhuis, the author of [Americas Best Zoos](#), was kind enough to look up some Financial data from an American Zoo Association survey of zoos from 2007 (the most recent available). Allen restricted his review to the 60 major zoos in his book Americas Best Zoos, plus the 37 zoos his book classified as "Best of the Rest" (including Franklin Park). About 10% of these 97 zoos didn't answer the survey, so they are not included. This includes the big corporate zoos, Disney's Animal Kingdom and Busch Gardens.

Here's what Allen had to say, "According to this 2007 survey, the Franklin Park Zoo had an Attendance of 266,997 in the year 2006, and they had an Operating Budget of \$8.01 million. (For Stone Zoo, it's 149,254 attendance and \$2.47m budget.) If these numbers are correct, that means Franklin Park is spending \$30 per visitor! Of the 86 zoos in my analysis, this is the 3rd-highest expenditure on the list. Only the San Diego Zoo (\$31.48) and San Diego Wild Animal Park (\$32.25) were higher. The Bronx Zoo is at \$27.07 (\$53.25m for 1,967,033 attendance); Central Park at \$7.88 (\$8.12m for 1,030,741); and Providence's Roger Williams Park Zoo is at \$16.50 (\$8.62m for 522,539)."

However, if we combine the Franklin Park Zoo and Stone zoo attendance numbers we have some different numbers.

416,251 attendees
\$10,480.000 expenditure
\$25.18 cost per visitor

While a comparison of the both Zoo New England zoos indicates that Franklin Park may cost more to run than the Stone Zoo. I think you have to really look at both Zoos together.

\$30 cost per visitor - Franklin Park
\$16.55 cost per visitor - Stone Zoo

I contacted Zoo England and received these attendance numbers for 2009, 2008, and 2007.

Franklin Park

2009 342313
2008 326543
2007 308166

Stone Zoo

2009 266484
2008 197889
2007 213016

Also, see these recent expenditures for Zoo New England in 2007 from [Guidestar financials](#) for the zoos.

The combined total attendance for both zoos in 2007 was 521,182 while the expenditure was \$11.3 million in 2007. Cost per visitor for 2007 is \$21.69. That means Zoo New England lowered its costs per visitor from 2006 to 2007. It will be interesting to see the numbers for 2008. It also looks as if Zoo New England compares favorably with other zoos around the country if you look at Allen's numbers.

Here's what Allen had to say about my combination, "Combining the 2 Zoo New England zoos, that \$25.18 spent per visitor is still on the high side. The Median of the 86 zoos I'm able to calculate is \$13.88. In fact ZNE would be higher than all but 9 zoos (SD, SDWAP, Baltimore, Miami, Palm Beach, Bronx, Akron, Rolling Hills (Kansas), and Dallas.)"

Allen gave his assessment of how Zoo New England is doing:

"Are the zoos "doing OK"? That's hard to answer. An honest assessment would say that, for the money they are spending, they SHOULD be attracting a larger attendance. At that Median ratio of \$13.88 per visitor, their \$10.48m should "buy" them a combined Attendance of 755,000 to the two zoos.

Allen also commented on the growing attendance numbers, "Those are some nice numbers for

showing an increase in Attendance. To go from 416,251 to 568,797 (2006 to 2008) is a 37% increase in just two years! They need to keep that up and they'll be fine."

I'm a Zoo New England member and my family regularly attends the Zoo now we have a three year old toddler.

What I've noticed over the last year and a half since we really started visiting the zoo is that the Zoos have been slowly been improving, new bear, otter and gibbon exhibits and a new toddler train at the Stone Zoo.

When you just look at the numbers, the Zoo has made some great progress in recent years under the current leadership. Maybe what we should really be thinking about is explaining in numbers how far the Zoo has come in recent years, and how well we compare against other Zoos. Certainly not the best, but definitely not the worst, as Allen explains.

At least we are beating our New York rivals on cost per visitor. Though sadly for New England pride if you compare the size of the budget for the New York Zoos, [\\$285 million in operations expenditure for New York to Massachusetts at \\$11.3 million](#) looks rather pitiful. Boston pride alone should get us thinking about a better financial arrangement for Zoo NE to help the zoo compete nationally.