



DIRECTOR

Henry Vilas Zoo of Dane County Madison, Wisconsin



The **Henry Vilas Zoo** of Dane County seeks a Director to lead a truly one-of-a-kind zoological institution: a free, AZA-accredited zoo with deep roots in the Madison community, supported by county government and a dedicated nonprofit foundation, and poised for a pivotal chapter of growth ahead.

The Zoo is entering an exciting new era. A major capital campaign is underway to rebuild significant portions of the campus, a newly launched nonprofit foundation is expanding the institution's fundraising capacity, and the Zoo has just been selected as one of only a few breeding facilities in the country for the Polar Bear Population Alliance. The Zoo also holds a meaningful and growing partnership with the UW School of Veterinary Medicine, a relationship that extends the Zoo's reach into collaborative veterinary care, research, and education in ways few community zoos can claim. Against this backdrop of momentum and possibility, the next Director will inherit an experienced and dedicated team, a deep connection to the community, and a genuine opportunity to shape the Zoo's future for decades to come.

This is a leadership role that rewards builders: people who are energized by collaboration, committed to culture, and motivated to lead an institution that exists, as it always has, to be accessible to everyone.

ORGANIZATIONAL SNAPSHOT

- ◆ One of few remaining free, AZA-accredited zoos in North America
- ◆ 28-acre campus in the heart of Madison, Wisconsin
- ◆ 650,000+ annual visitors
- ◆ 650+ animals representing 115+ species, including 20 threatened or endangered
- ◆ 43+ FTE county staff, plus 30-70 seasonal employees and approximately 650 volunteers
- ◆ \$7.5 million annual operating budget (2025)
- ◆ \$20+ million Heart of the Zoo capital campaign underway
- ◆ Newly launched Henry Vilas Zoo Foundation nonprofit to support fundraising
- ◆ AZA accreditation renewed September 2024; next review 2029

MISSION AND VISION

Mission

Dedicated to exceptional animal care and conserving wildlife through local engagement and global partnerships.

Vision

Locally loved community treasure. Globally recognized conservation leader. Forever accessible.



WHY THIS ROLE IS COMPELLING

Leadership opportunities like this one are rare. The Henry Vilas Zoo offers the chance to lead a genuinely beloved institution at a pivotal moment, with deep County support, a committed team, and real momentum for meaningful impact. **This role is uniquely suited for a leader who values:**

- ◆ The chance to shape a free, AZA-accredited zoo during a defining period of growth and renewal
- ◆ Being part of major Zoo redevelopment, with the Heart of the Zoo project slated to rebuild 50-60% of the campus, starting with the Edge of Africa Giraffe Pavilion
- ◆ The opportunity to partner with a new nonprofit foundation with access to Madison's deep and enthusiastic donor community
- ◆ A highly engaged, passionate staff that is ready for collaborative, transparent, empowering leadership
- ◆ The stability and resources of county government, including outstanding compensation and one of the most competitive benefits packages in the public sector
- ◆ Life in Madison, Wisconsin, which is consistently ranked among the most livable cities in the country, with exceptional quality of life, natural beauty, cultural amenities, and affordability

ARE YOU ... ?

- ◆ An Animal-Centered Leader: Someone with a deep connection to animals, grounded in the belief that exceptional animal care is the foundation upon which everything else at the Zoo is built
- ◆ A Unifying Leader: Someone who sees the whole Zoo, brings departments together, and drives a one-team culture
- ◆ A Transparent Communicator: Consistent, direct, and honest, providing clear rationale for decisions and following through reliably
- ◆ A Relationship Builder: Invested in community, county, donors, staff, and union relationships alike
- ◆ A Collaborative Executive: Empowering of the managers and teams around you, trusting staff to own their work
- ◆ A Mission Believer: Genuinely energized by conservation and the role zoos play in connecting people to the natural world
- ◆ A Champion of Access and Learning: Someone who believes that education and community engagement are core to the Zoo's identity, and who values their outcomes on their own terms.
- ◆ Financially and Operationally Grounded: Experienced navigating complex organizational environments, managing budgets, and driving revenue in a free-admission context

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Leadership, Vision, and Organizational Management

- ◆ Serve as a leader with full responsibility for organizational performance, culture, and direction
- ◆ Foster a collaborative, accountable, and transparent workplace culture that earns trust at every level
- ◆ Mentor, support, and develop the senior leadership team and broader staff
- ◆ Clarify roles, accountabilities, and decision-making authority across departments
- ◆ Navigate county government processes, including HR, budget, capital approval, and procurement
- ◆ Lead strategic planning and ensure alignment between institutional priorities and day-to-day operations

Animal Welfare, Conservation, and AZA Accreditation

- ◆ Champion the highest standards of animal welfare, care, and enrichment
- ◆ Maintain compliance with AZA, USDA, and all applicable regulatory requirements
- ◆ Prepare the institution for its 2029 AZA accreditation review
- ◆ Support and strengthen conservation partnerships, including local initiatives and global species programs
- ◆ Build on the Zoo's relationship with the University of Wisconsin-Madison across veterinary, research, and education dimensions

Fundraising, Community Relations, and Advocacy

- ◆ Serve as the visible face and primary ambassador of Henry Vilas Zoo in Madison and beyond
- ◆ Cultivate relationships with civic, business, government, and philanthropic stakeholders
- ◆ Build public trust and expand the Zoo's profile

Revenue, Operations, and Guest Experience

- ◆ Drive earned revenue through concessions, events, education programs, and special experiences that keep the Zoo financially sustainable and free
- ◆ Strengthen the Zoo's partnership with contracted food and retail provider SSA
- ◆ Oversee capital projects, exhibit development, and campus improvements in coordination with county public works
- ◆ Ensure an exceptional, inclusive guest experience for the Zoo's 650,000+ annual visitors
- ◆ Lead sustainability efforts, including the Zoo's commitment to becoming fossil-fuel-free within 15 years

County and Board Partnership

- ◆ Report to and maintain a strong, communicative relationship with the Dane County Executive
- ◆ Navigate county board relationships, including budget advocacy and policy alignment
- ◆ Partner with the Dane County Zoo Commission and the new Foundation on shared priorities





POSITION REQUIREMENTS AND QUALIFICATIONS

A strong grounding in AZA institutional knowledge is essential, whether through direct animal care experience or significant senior leadership in an AZA-accredited setting, paired with the financial acumen to manage a complex public-sector budget and grow both earned and contributed revenue over time.

- ◆ Bachelor's degree or equivalent leadership experience
- ◆ Progressive senior leadership experience in a zoo, aquarium, or comparable institution
- ◆ Demonstrated success building or supporting organizational culture and staff trust
- ◆ Strong knowledge of AZA standards and animal welfare principles
- ◆ Financial management experience, including budget oversight and revenue responsibility
- ◆ Excellent interpersonal, communication, and relationship-building skills
- ◆ Experience working within or alongside government or public-sector organizations, or a genuine openness to learning that environment
- ◆ Track record of successful union or organized labor relations (preferred)

CONTEXT AND OPPORTUNITIES

The Zoo is in the early stages of what promises to be its most significant transformation in decades. The next Director will step into a role rich with possibility and well-supported by the county, the community, and a capable leadership team.



Heart of the Zoo Capital Campaign

A \$20+ million initiative to rebuild the central portions of the campus is underway, beginning with the Edge of Africa Giraffe Pavilion. This flagship project, which will feature immersive animal experiences, expanded conservation programming, and new guest amenities, represents the most ambitious capital undertaking in the Zoo's history. Subsequent phases will address the rhinoceros, big cat, and front-of-zoo areas. The next director will steward this campaign to completion while continuing to lay the groundwork for what comes next.

A New Nonprofit Foundation

The Henry Vilas Zoo Foundation launched in spring 2026, creating a new vehicle for philanthropy. Madison is a highly engaged, affluent community with a strong affinity for its Zoo. The next director will have the opportunity to build this foundation from the ground up and tap a donor base that is ready to invest in the institution's future.

National Conservation Recognition

The Zoo was recently selected for the Polar Bear Population Alliance, joining a small number of institutions nationally with the credentials and capacity to contribute to polar bear conservation and breeding. The Zoo also maintains a strong and growing partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Madison, including collaborative veterinary care, research, enrichment design, and educational programming that extends the Zoo's impact well beyond its 28 acres.

Culture and Team

The Zoo's staff is deeply passionate and mission-aligned. The next director will find a staff ready to move forward under clear, empowering leadership. A culture shift is underway, and the next director has the opportunity to accelerate it with a genuinely inclusive, one-team approach that earns trust at every level of the organization. One early opportunity for the incoming director will be to bring greater clarity and structure to the Zoo's operational functions, building a foundation that can support the campus growth ahead.



MADISON, WISCONSIN

Henry Vilas Zoo sits at the edge of Vilas Park on the near west side of Madison, adjacent to the shores of Lake Wingra and minutes from the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus and the State Capitol. It is, in every sense, embedded in the community it serves.

Madison is consistently ranked among the most livable cities in the United States, offering an exceptional combination of natural beauty, cultural richness, community energy, and relative affordability compared to coastal or high-growth metros. It is a city of four lakes, 282 parks, and extensive bike trails, with platinum-level status as a Bicycle Friendly Community. The University of Wisconsin anchors a robust intellectual and cultural life, and the isthmus between Lakes Mendota and Monona is home to the Capitol Square, a thriving farmers' market, distinctive restaurants, and year-round events.

Madison has a strong economy anchored by state government, the university, and a growing technology and health-tech sector. Employers include Epic Systems, Google, Microsoft, American Family Insurance, and a broad array of biotech and professional services firms. Top-ranked hospitals, excellent schools, and a deeply engaged community make Madison an exceptional place to build a life as well as a career.

Those relocating to Madison should be prepared for Wisconsin winters, and will find a community that embraces them fully: outdoor skating, ski trails, hockey on the lakes in winter; sailing, festivals, farmers' markets, and Badger football in the warmer months. As one staff member put it simply: "I got here and I was home."

APPLICATION PROCESS

The Henry Vilas Zoo of Dane County has retained Canopy Strategic Partners to manage this search. To be considered for this role, please submit a letter of interest and resume in a single PDF to:

Lauren David, Canopy Strategic Partners
ldavid@canopysp.com

All inquiries and applications will be held in strict confidence. Canopy Strategic Partners actively recruits candidates from across the zoological and conservation community, including those currently in senior leadership roles, those on a leadership development trajectory, and those whose backgrounds span adjacent fields. We encourage candidates from all backgrounds to apply.