



South Mountain Conservancy

South Mountain Reservation Stewardship, Advocacy & Public Engagement

January 16, 2020

To Essex County Executive Joe DiVincenzo, Jr.,

This letter expresses the concerns of the South Mountain Conservancy Board of Trustees with the expansion plans for the Turtle Back Zoo. Our concerns are twofold: first, the plans for the amphitheater / conservation pavilion, and second, the overall direction and scope of expansion as outlined in the recently published master plan.

The new amphitheater has and continues to be a matter of public debate. While many arguments for and against have been made with respect to the amphitheater, we view the core issue more broadly as how best to manage the overwhelming success of all the attractions at that area of the South Mountain Reservation. **The addition of the loop around the Orange Reservoir, the general build-up of the zoo over the last decade, and the addition of commercial enterprises such as McLoone's, Sahara mini-golf, and the Treetop Adventure Course have put enormous pressure on parking and increased traffic in the area.**

In the past, we have supported much of this expansion. When the zoo expanded about a decade ago, we worked with the County to reroute existing South Mountain Reservation hiking trails. We viewed the 11 acres acquired north of Mayapple Hill (the Mandelbaum property) and the 52-acre state-owned parcel incorporated into the reservation as efforts to replace what was appropriated elsewhere. This had benefits for all: the zoo could grow, the Lenape Trail could be extended all the way to Route 10, and the Zoo Loop hiking trail was constructed with Green Acres/Open Space funds. We were supportive of the loop around the Orange Reservoir and appreciative of the entry points that the county added to the trail system. Overall, we are thankful for the partnership between the South Mountain Conservancy and Essex County on the issues and challenges placed on this incredible natural resource and look forward to continuing this partnership.

Nevertheless, as the Board of Trustees of the South Mountain Conservancy debated zoo expansion, we took as our touchstone the Conservancy's mission as:

... steward and advocate for the 2,110-acre South Mountain Reservation by working to protect, restore and enhance its ecology, natural beauty, and infrastructure through sustainable use, informed public policy, and public education and engagement.

The zoo master plan indicates a desire to develop new exhibits that will potentially boost attendance from the current level of 900,000 annually to 1.2 million. This puts **additional pressure on the ecology, natural beauty and infrastructure of the reservation itself by not only enlarging the zoo's footprint, but the necessary parking.** The zoo master plan indicates an increase of around 425 parking spots will be required if attendance reaches 1.2 million annually, or potentially 12,000 attendees on a peak day. The recent completion of the third parking deck has helped, but approximately 3 ½ acres of reservation land has still been taken for overflow "special event" parking on the west side of Cherry Lane near the Oakdale Picnic area. In addition, the overall expansion for the African Adventure exhibits looks to re-purpose at least another five acres beyond the 1 ½ acres for the pavilion. When the zoo was formed in 1963 our understanding is that zoo boundaries were never set. Does that mean that beyond the amphitheater another five acres will be taken in the future? Or possibly ten? **We would like to understand what are the limits, if any, of zoo expansion.**

In addition to the expanding zoo and parking footprint, **the traffic and crowds that the entire area attracts negatively impacts the quality of life in the surrounding communities, especially West Orange.** With a 33 percent increase in zoo attendance contemplated, there is a legitimate concern for people who live in the local community as well as for people who are simply trying to quickly pass through the area. A true understanding of how traffic will be affected is needed.

Viewing all these changes collectively, in our view this is too much expansion without further study of the community impact and mitigating the effects on the reservation.