The Roanoke Times

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**Shuttered zoo still has hungry mouths to feed**

By Ralph Berrier Jr.

Nova the red panda chowed down on her usual afternoon meal of apple wedges and high-fiber biscuits, fed to her by a friendly zookeeper who wore a facemask.

She roamed along the limbs and bamboo stalks of her enclosure like it was an ordinary day at Mill Mountain Zoo.

Pandemic? What pandemic?

Even though the COVID-19 outbreak has forced the Roanoke zoo to close its gates to the public, the animals are still being well-fed and cared for, said Robin Lentz, one of Mill Mountain Zoo’s co-directors.

“The big priorities right now are making sure we can get medications, pay for food and have enough staff,” Lentz said, who added that the zoo has enough money for all three expenses currently.

The closing comes at a precarious time for Mill Mountain Zoo, which was just waking from its wintertime semi-hibernation of reduced hours. The loss of revenue at the gate has affected the jobs of six of the zoo’s 13 full-time employees. Co-directors Lentz and Derek Kellogg have taken salary cuts, two staffers have been furloughed without pay and two others have had their hours reduced. A part-time veterinary technician was also furloughed.

The seven remaining members of the zoo’s animal staff, which include Lentz, are working in shifts to make sure the approximately 170 zoo animals receive daily food and care.

Roughly 50% of the zoo’s annual operating budget of about $800,000 comes from admissions, education programs such as summer camps, special events and gift shop sales. With the gates closed until at least June due to the pandemic, the zoo needs other revenue to support the welfare of the animals.

The zoo learned this week that it will receive federal assistance from the Paycheck Protection Program administered by the U.S. Small Business Association. That money should cover about eight weeks of the remaining staff’s salaries and the zoo’s utilities costs, Kellogg said.

“That ultimately wipes out the cost of payroll and utilities for a two-month period,” Kellogg said. “That’s a huge boost as we try to come out of this.”

Fundraising has been a continuous chore for the zoo, a nonprofit that in recent years has relied less on government dollars to cover expenses and more heavily on grants from other nonprofit groups such as the Alexander McCausland Charitable Trust. Lentz believes that some grant money will be awarded earlier than usual because of the zoo’s present financial plight.

The zoo also launched a GoFundMe page (www.gofundme.com/f/mill-mountain-zoo-needs-you) to raise money for ongoing expenses during the shutdown. The site had raised about $3,500 as of Wednesday afternoon.

“We continue to need about $2,500 a day to run the zoo,” Lentz said.

Construction on a new black bear exhibit has continued during the shutdown and could be completed by summer, even though it’s uncertain if the zoo will be open by then, Kellogg said. The construction was supported by $300,000 in gifts from the Kitas and Lutsko Family Foundation and Barbara and Ed Kitas.

Businesses and individuals have stepped up to help the zoo. One woman donated a load of hay, Lentz said. Roanoke Fruit and Produce Co., one of the zoo’s regular fresh food suppliers for the animals, has given the zoo extra items that include lettuce, pomegranates, pears, cabbage and chayote — a squash that zookeepers had to research to learn if the animals would eat it. (The animals gobbled it up.)

“That’s gourmet for humans, as well,” Kellogg joked.

Kroger often donates extra produce to the zoo. Roanoke County smoothie shop Elderberry’s offered to stock the zoo’s gift shop merchandise for sale at its shop and online.

“We love the zoo,” said Elderberry’s owner, Rebecca Mason, who plans to take donations to buy extra food from her weekly produce shippers that she will then give to the zoo.

“I want to help them out, because even though they don’t have income coming in, they still have literal mouths to feed.”

When the gates reopen, Lentz hopes that the zoo will be a popular destination for homebound families.

“Hopefully, outdoor venues like us will be more enticing because you can keep your distance” from other visitors, she said.

The zoo was mostly quiet on a recent Wednesday afternoon, except for the howls of eight red wolves that called in response to the sounds of sirens from the city below the mountain. Zookeeper Brittany Furr-Stanfield fed animals while wearing a protective mask. The zoo had already begun protective measures for animals, even before the report of a tiger at the Bronx Zoo contracting coronavirus from a human caretaker.

Many of the mammals are susceptible to seasonal influenza, Lentz said, so the zoo’s staff had already taken precautions to keep animals safe before the pandemic. The daily routine is like the slow winter season, when visitors aren’t around but the work goes on.

“Even when we’re closed, we’re still here,” Furr-Stanfield said. “As for the animals, life goes on for them. I don’t think any of them have had any aversions to the mask. Everything’s normal.”

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**Neighbors go to court against rehab house**

By Ralph Berrier Jr.

Earlier this summer, Barry and Rebecca Marsh got new next-door neighbors on their shady, tree-lined southwest Roanoke street: eight men undergoing treatment for alcohol and drug addictions.

The house next to them on Oakwood Drive Southwest, which had been a single-family residence, was sold in June and converted into a temporary home for clients of Pinnacle Treatment Services, a facility across town on Peters Creek Road. The Marshes did not know that the house had been sold and turned into what is known as a recovery residence. Apparently, neither did any of the residents of the Oak Hill neighborhood.

A Roanoke zoning administrator had allowed the recovery residence to be established in the single-family residential neighborhood through her interpretation of zoning ordinances regarding group homes and through compliance with federal law that prohibits housing discrimination. More than 30 homeowners in the neighborhood appealed that zoning decision to the city’s board of zoning appeals, which ruled against them after a four-hour public hearing Oct. 14 and allowed the recovery residence to stay.

Now, some in the neighborhood are taking their case to court. Some residents, acting on behalf of the neighborhood association, filed a petition in Roanoke Circuit Court on Tuesday that asks the court to overturn the BZA’s decision and to direct that Pinnacle immediately cease operations at the Oakwood Drive house.

“I think this could happen anywhere in the city of Roanoke,” said Marsh, who is one of the petitioners.

“Anywhere you could see a ‘for sale’ sign go up, you have the potential for a drug and alcohol rehab facility.”

The dispute over the location of the recovery residence comes during an era when addiction to opioids, methamphetamine, alcohol and other substances has risen in Southwest Virginia.

Oakwood Drive resident Bill Hopkins, a Roanoke attorney, said that residents of the Oak Hill Neighborhood Association support treatment for people who are addicted to drugs. However, he said that the recovery residence should not be allowed in the neighborhood because it does not meet criteria set out by state law and local ordinances.

“It’s important that people have a place to go and recover, I understand that,” Hopkins said. “But you have to follow the law.”

Roanoke zoning administrator Jillian Moore determined in July that the recovery residence meets the definition of a “group home” as permitted by the local zoning ordinance for what is called an R-7, Residential Single-Family Zoning District. Because the phrase “recovery residence” does not appear in Roanoke’s ordinances, Moore determined that the house satisfied the definition of a group home.

When asked about her decision, Moore wrote an email that referred to her conclusion contained in her report to the BZA.

“Group homes are provided in the definition of family to ensure disabled and/or protected classes of persons defined in Fair Housing Act and American[s] with Disabilities Act have an equal opportunity to access, use and enjoy housing,” Moore wrote in her report. She added that her decision considers “a recovery residence as similar to that of a group home, which aligns access to housing for all persons protected by [the] Fair Housing Act.”

City Attorney Tim Spencer agreed with that interpretation and defended it during the Oct. 14 BZA meeting. He said that Moore properly interpreted the ordinance and that the residence meets certification requirements to be in the neighborhood.

“The city believes that our zoning administrator properly interpreted the zoning ordinance,” Spencer said during an interview days after the BZA meeting. “It is essentially the same as a group home.”

That interpretation is one of the points raised in the neighborhood’s petition against the recovery residence. Oak Hill, which is located just off Brambleton Avenue, is a leafy neighborhood where most of the properties are assessed for well over $300,000, with a couple of them eclipsing $500,000.

The house on Oakwood Drive was purchased in June by CapGrow Holding, a Chicago-based firm that specializes in buying homes to house people with behavioral needs, according to its website. It is unclear how CapGrow came to purchase the Oakwood Drive home, as well as a second Roanoke residence on Brambleton Avenue. CapGrow leases the Oakwood Drive home to Pinnacle.

The sale price of $354,950 was nearly $30,000 below the property’s assessed value, according to online city real estate records. Some neighbors have said that CapGrow offered to sell the house back to other residents of the neighborhood, but at a price more than double its assessed value.

Attempts by The Roanoke Times to reach a representative with CapGrow were not successful this week. Phone messages left with Pinnacle executive director Krista Mobley were not returned.

An effort to speak to any of the residents currently staying at the house while they receive treatment was rebuffed by a Pinnacle employee.

According to documents that Mobley filed for the BZA hearing on behalf of Pinnacle, the house is for people “in need of safe and sober housing and transportation” and gives them a place to learn living and social skills in a peaceful setting. The occupants receive outpatient treatment off-site five days a week and participate virtually in recovery meetings at night and on weekends. The residents contribute to cooking meals, shopping, cleaning and practicing good hygiene, all while under the guidance of a staff person who is on-site at all times when people are at the house, according to the documents.

“They will also prepare/perform chore lists, attend goal setting meetings in the morning ... review the days and goals, etc. This helps in peaceful and socially appropriate sharing of living environments,” Mobley wrote in her BZA filing.

In their petition to the circuit court, residents of the Oak Hill neighborhood claim that the BZA erred in upholding Moore’s zoning interpretation, that the recovery residence does not meet the definition of a group home and that the facility is not properly licensed.

Residents of the Oak Hill neighborhood said that the recovery residence generally houses eight men who are at the home for up to eight weeks. During the day, the men are taken to Pinnacle’s treatment facility before returning to the house.

“Our argument is that ‘you don’t reside there’ and you don’t meet the requirement of the zoning ordinance,” Hopkins said.

He added: “We’re a neighborhood of people who live there permanently. We know each other and help each other. We’re what a neighborhood is supposed to be about. … [The recovery residence] undermines the definition of a neighborhood.”

Spencer said that the city has an obligation to assist people with addictions who need treatment, and he acknowledged that the current interpretation of the zoning ordinance could mean that a recovery residence could be allowed to operate in any neighborhood in the city.

“Yes, it could happen on my street or on your street,” Spencer said.

Spencer, in an interview before Oak Hill residents filed their court petition, said he thinks that the residents and the city can still resolve the issue to everyone’s satisfaction.

“I will continue to try to find a resolution that is meaningful to all parties,” Spencer said.

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**Roanoke council talks monument removal**

By Ralph Berrier Jr.

Roanoke’s Robert E. Lee memorial does not stand six stories high like the one to the Confederate general in Richmond does. Lee is not cast in bronze, astride a horse. Roanoke’s memorial to Lee is a stone pillar, about 10 feet tall, that sits in a quiet plaza that also bears his name.

But Roanoke’s Lee memorial will most likely meet the same fate as the imposing monument in Richmond that Gov. Ralph Northam ordered this week be taken down.

A majority of the Roanoke City Council wants to remove the Lee memorial from downtown Roanoke as soon as is legally possible, which will be sometime after July 1, when a new state law gives localities the right to take down monuments to the Confederate States of America.

“It’s way past time for the monument to go away,” Roanoke council member Bill Bestpitch said Friday.

The issue of Confederate monuments emerged again in the wake of nationwide protests following the death of George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man who died in Minneapolis on May 25 after a white police officer kept a knee on his neck for more than eight minutes. On Thursday, Northam ordered that the massive state-owned Lee monument be removed from Monument Avenue.

Roanoke’s council considered doing something about its own Lee memorial in the summer of 2017, following the alt-right rally in Charlottesville during which counterprotester Heather Heyer was killed after a man rammed a car into a crowd. In fact, a few weeks after that rally, the Lee memorial in Roanoke was spray-painted with the words, “Rest in power, Heather Heyer.”

State law at the time prohibited localities from removing Confederate monuments. That will change July 1, when a law passed this year by new Democratic majorities in the General Assembly and signed by Northam goes into effect. The law establishes a legal process that municipalities must go through, which includes public hearings.

Roanoke appears ready to start that process soon.

“We want to make sure we follow the law, and I anticipate we will get together as a council and start having conversations about this,” said Roanoke Mayor Sherman Lea.

Lea, the second African American mayor in Roanoke’s history, said in 2017 that he did “not want to stir the pot” on possibly removing the Lee memorial.

Friday evening, Lea clarified that he was in favor of removing the memorial, but still wanted the entire council and the public to weigh in on the process.

"I am supportive of moving the statue," Lea said. "I want to make sure we do it the right way and that there is an opportunity for public discourse."

Those council discussions will likely be in favor of removal.

Council members Anita Price and Trish White-Boyd were both adamant that the memorial be removed and that the name of Lee Plaza be changed.

“It’s time,” White-Boyd said. “I think you will discover that other members all concur that it’s a good time to have this conversation.”

White-Boyd, who is black, said she has mostly heard from white Roanokers who want the memorial taken down.

“Let me make clear, I haven’t heard from blacks,” White-Boyd said, “it’s been all white.”

Price, who is black, said the council conversations will be painful, but necessary.

“Finally,” she said. “The time is now. The Confederate monuments are symbols of an era, and not just an era, but of a mentality. Now, we’ve got leadership from our state leader. We’ve got a process. There are some difficult conversations that heretofore we were reluctant to have. But the wound is open. The Band-Aid is ripped off. It’s time to get through it and follow the process as it will be laid out.”

Roanoke’s Lee memorial was erected by the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1960, a year before the centennial of the start of the Civil War. Several council members noted that it was no coincidence that the Lee memorial was erected during the height of the civil rights movement and six years after the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling had ordered schools be integrated.

Virginia fought the ruling during a period known as Massive Resistance, a fight to reject integration that still smoldered in 1960.

“I don’t think the timing was coincidental” when Roanoke’s Lee memorial was erected, Bestpitch said. “It was intended as a message to keep the races apart.”

Roanoke Vice Mayor Joe Cobb agreed with Bestpitch’s opinion that the memorial represented a segregationist cause. He also noted that the timing of its placement correlated with Roanoke’s clearance and demolition of poorer black neighborhoods in northeast Roanoke during a program called urban renewal.

“This wasn’t a century ago, this was 50, 60 years ago,” Cobb said. “Right after Jim Crow and in the middle of urban renewal. That’s very chilling to me.”

Council member Djuna Osborne said that her personal feeling about the memorial is that “it no longer be erected in a place of reverence,” but she will wait on making a final decision until she hears from the public.

“I think it’s important to hear what people have to say about it and what we can do about it,” Osborne said.

Council member Michelle Davis could not be reached for comment Friday.

A council majority on Friday favored changing the name of Lee Plaza, which is notable for its tall, leafy trees and large marble tablets inscribed with the names of every Roanoker who died in 20th and 21st-century wars.

Lea said that if the council changes the plaza’s name he prefers that it “continues to recognize veterans.”

“We have some options there,” he added.

Bestpitch agreed that a new name for the plaza reflect its presence as the city’s war memorial.

“You could call it Freedom Plaza,” he said, “because every name there died so that we could keep our freedom.”