

The Columbus Zoo is a nonprofit organization partially supported by taxes but is not required by law to comply with public records requests. Zoo officials announce that “thoughtful and reasonable” requests will be provided in the future.

So how does this issue relate to education in Ohio?

Columbus Zoo is receiving \$20 million in tax funds annually. Since the zoo is organized as a nonprofit entity, it is not subject to public record requests. Most of the zoo's revenue is, however, from private sources.

It is commendable that the zoo will voluntarily make, at least, some records available upon requests by the media.

Ohio taxpayers are being charged multiplied billions of dollars annually for private school support and nonprofit charter school sponsors (authorizers) wherein there is no accountability to the taxpayer. The private school operators and supporters resist any and all efforts to hold these entities accountable and transparent to the taxpayers. (They respond that the constituents of their services hold them accountable, which misses the point completely.)

The Governor of Ohio and the General Assembly could at least enact legislation that would require all public and private entities that receive tax money to be subject to public records requests. Is that likely to happen? No, because the private school lobby is a lucrative source of campaign funds.

Zoo is changing policy on records

CEO: Some document requests will be fulfilled

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The Columbus Zoo and Aquarium is changing its approach to answering public records and will begin to provide some documents in response to “thoughtful and reasonable” requests, CEO Tom Schmid said in an interview with The Dispatch.

The zoo has previously resisted fulfilling records requests from The Dispatch, citing the organization's status as a nonprofit.

Schmid described the organization as a “hybrid,” since it's registered as a 501(c)3 nonprofit but parts of the operation are public. The zoo is located on Columbus-owned land in Delaware County and gets over \$20 million annually from Franklin County taxpayers, who are voting this fall on a 10-year extension of the levy.

“We are a hybrid public-private organization, and therefore we have a duty to share information and not hide behind that cloak of a strictly private organization that doesn't share information,” Schmid said.

The zoo has thrown up a “blockade” to records requests in the past, Schmid said, but that will be changed for specific and thoughtful requests.

The zoo is not beholden to the same types of open record laws that other public organizations are obliged to follow, Schmid said, but he said records requests will go through the zoo's attorney and that the organization is seeking to share as many records as possible.

The zoo long has resisted providing public documents. In July, The Dispatch requested a list of zoo animals that have died in the past year after learning one of five zoo lions had been euthanized in April due to a divider door failing in an enclosure, allowing incompatible lions to mingle and attack others.

The zoo responded: "The Zoo is an Ohio 501(c)(3) nonprofit entity. It is not a public entity for purposes of the Ohio Public Records Act. We appreciate your inquiry, but the zoo must be consistent in how we respond to all public records requests."

The Dispatch editorial board critiqued the zoo's withholding of records in an Aug. 6 editorial. Schmid said that sparked internal discussion about the policy moving forward.

"I think we needed to be challenged on it, and I think it was appropriate for them to challenge us on it," Schmid said.

He also said that the zoo does not anticipate charging for public records.

The shift also is not just for the news media: Schmid said the zoo will take "thoughtful and reasonable" requests from others and "we're going to respond thoughtfully and reasonably."

Schmid said that context is important — and that zoo staff in relevant departments will help news media clarify what some data mean.

Part of the reluctance to share public records has come from how former leaders embezzled over \$2 million from the zoo — and how that affected the hundreds of zoo employees learning about the scandal amid the COVID- 19 pandemic, Schmid said.

"Through that process, our staff got scared — I think they were cautious, and they pulled back a little bit. It was almost like a protective shield," Schmid said.

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