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Dallas Officials to Trumpet Early Success of Privatized Zoo

Dallas, TX – December 3, 2009 – Zoo officials and Dallas Mayor Tom Leppert have scheduled a news conference for this afternoon – in part to tout how well the Dallas Zoo has done since it was spun off from the city.

Since management of the zoo went private Oct. 1, about \$2.25 million in private funds have been pledged, zoo officials said.

Dallas Zoological Society president Michael Meadows expects more to come.

"I think what we have seen in the past few weeks is a much higher level of interest among private donors in making the zoo great," he said.

The City Council voted in August to hand over management of the zoo and ownership of its animals to the private zoological society – a transfer that took effect Oct. 1. The city retains ownership of the zoo.

When the arrangement was proposed earlier this year, in part to help balance the city's budget, Meadows argued that one result would be to make it easier to raise private funds.

"People think that when the government is going to fund an institution, their money isn't needed anymore," he said.

The \$2.25 million in private pledges, from four donors, will be separate from the \$1.5 million that zoo officials are trying to raise for the Giants of the Savanna project, now under construction.

To aid that effort, today's news conference will include announcement of the formation of the Savanna Society. Membership will require at least a \$10,000 pledge to support the project, Meadows said.

About \$25 million of the \$30 million cost for the Savanna exhibit will be funded by a bond issue that voters approved in 2006, and \$5 million more has been pledged by private donors. The added \$1.5 million – which includes a \$500,000 pledge from the Eugene McDermott Foundation – will allow additional improvements.

The 11-acre Savanna project is the most ambitious addition to the zoo since the Wilds of Africa exhibit opened nearly 20 years ago. The project is expected to open to the public in May.

Under current plans, the habitat will resemble African grasslands. It will include a restaurant and a natural-looking habitat populated by animals such as elephants, giraffes, ostriches, warthogs and zebras.

And lions.

In an informal survey by *The Dallas Morning News* in August, visitors said that what most dissatisfied them about the Dallas Zoo was the lack of the King of the Jungle.

That will be remedied with the addition of a pride of five young lions, promised Gregg Hudson, CEO of the newly created Dallas Zoo Inc.