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**NEWS  
RELEASE**

05/ 28/ 2024

## City Files Complaints Regarding Zoological Society with Texas Attorney General Charitable Trust Division and Internal Revenue Service

**EL PASO, Texas**—The City of El Paso has filed two complaints and a claim regarding the Zoological Society due to ongoing concerns over the Society’s failure to comply with the City’s requests to properly close out the 2012 License Agreement and continued use of funds for other than their intended purpose: to support the El Paso Zoo and Botanical Gardens.

For over two years, the City made efforts to discuss necessary changes to the agreement, a draft of which was provided to the Society in 2022. The City extended the agreement twice to give the Society additional time. An agreement could not be reached and on February 26, 2024, the City Council voted to direct the City Manager to close out the agreement set to expire on March 17, 2024.

The Society refused to provide detailed financial information to the City Comptroller and Deputy City Manager. In two separate letters to the Society’s lawyer Elisaveta Dolghih—dated March 20, 2024 and May 9, 2024—City Attorney Karla Nieman requested the Society provide the names of three third-party certified public accountants to conduct a full accounting to clarify what funds exist, and to what purpose the City must apply them for the Zoo. In the May 9 letter, the City gave the Society 15 days to act on a list of seven (7) key items no later than May 24, 2024, to close out the agreement between the City and the Society. On May 16, 2024, via a letter from Ms. Dolghih to Ms. Nieman, the Society rejected the City’s request for a third-party CPA.

On Monday, May 20, 2024, the City Council directed staff to “take all steps and actions necessary, including the execution of any required documents, to follow the course of action recommendations and pursue other fundraising opportunities.”

On Friday, May 24, 2024, Ms. Dolghih via an email to Ms. Nieman rejected the City’s request on behalf of the Society to act on the seven (7) items listed in the May 9, 2024 letter. As a result, the City has been compelled by the Society to take the following actions:

1. File a complaint regarding the Society with the Texas Attorney General Charitable Trust Division regarding possible mismanagement or diversion of charitable assets;
2. File a Tax-Exempt Organization Complaint with the Internal Revenue Service to determine if there has been a violation of federal tax law; and
3. File a claim with the Society’s insurance carrier.

“Despite our extensive efforts to reach a resolution with the Zoological Society, we have been left with no choice but to take these actions to ensure that the funds meant for the betterment of the El Paso Zoo and Botanical Gardens are properly managed and utilized,” said Mayor Oscar Leeser. “Our priority is, and always will be, the welfare of our community, our animals and the integrity of our public institutions.”

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**Links:** City News Releases issued on [May 19, 2024](#) and [May 20, 2024](#); referenced [letters and exhibits](#)



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