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**LOCAL NON-PROFIT FRIENDS OF BEAR HOLLOW, INC., PROPOSES \$13 MILLION SPLOST PROJECT TO REBUILD BEAR HOLLOW ZOO AS ENVISIONED BY ACC MEMORIAL PARK MASTER PLAN**

*Bear Hollow Zoo is a much-loved, but aging Athens treasure. Friends of Bear Hollow, Inc., has proposed a project for the 2020 SPLOST that will authorize funds to completely rebuild the zoo, which will be beneficial to zoo visitors and animal residents as well as the greater Athens community.*

**Athens, GA:** The peaceful, shaded pathways of Bear Hollow Wildlife Trail (AKA Bear Hollow Zoo) in Memorial Park offer visitors from the Athens region and beyond an opportunity to learn about local wildlife. For 33 years the mission of Bear Hollow Zoo has been to help the community understand our place in and reliance upon natural systems through interpretative education and the exhibit of Georgia native wildlife. The zoo is home to bears, bobcats, otters, owls, and reptiles that are not releasable back into the wild. They live out their lives as educational ambassadors to thousands of visitors from our schools and community.

In 2017 Athens-Clarke County (ACC) residents outlined their vision for Bear Hollow as part of the Memorial Park Master Plan. The Friends of Bear Hollow, Inc., a newly-formed non-profit dedicated to supporting Bear Hollow Zoo, has submitted a proposal for the 2020 SPLOST requesting an investment of approximately \$13 million to completely rebuild the zoo and make the vision of the 2018 Master Plan a reality. This SPLOST proposal has adopted almost all of the Master Plan's components including a new reptile house and animal nutrition building, restrooms, accessible pathways, new animal exhibits, an educational wetland garden, and all of the infrastructure necessary to support a modern zoo.

Bear Hollow is now at a crossroads. Infrastructure and exhibits are over 30 years old, beyond the end of their expected life, and are not sustainable. The current facility was not designed to meet modern zoo standards and now requires a critical infusion of community resources. It's been well-loved over the years - thousands of visitors, students, and scout and civic groups have enjoyed the environmental education programming and visiting the non-releasable, native wildlife that call Bear Hollow home. However, the zoo risks being "loved to death" without significant reinvestment.

The Friends of Bear Hollow urge community members to support this SPLOST proposal by reaching out to their local elected officials. Citizens can also support this project through a number of ways available online at <https://friendsofbearhollow.org/SPLOST>, including letter writing and sharing testimonials of how Bear Hollow has played a role in their lives. Investing in Bear Hollow now will ensure the legacy of our community's commitment to public education about our local environment. Not only will a new Bear Hollow enrich the community's quality of life, it will draw increased tourism revenue. An urban zoo is an economic boon to property values and the tax base and a driver of local tourism. A modern zoo is a place for building connections, volunteerism, internship opportunities, exposure to STEM educational curriculum, and access to unique gathering spaces. A reinvigorated Bear Hollow will help to position ACC as a leader in environmental stewardship and sustainability practices. Each of these outcomes also align with the Envision Athens plan. Finally, this proposal will enable Bear Hollow to continue to contribute to the unique character that makes Athens such a fantastic place to live.

**About the Friends of Bear Hollow, Inc.:** The Friends of Bear Hollow, Inc., (FOBH) is a newly-established non-profit organization dedicated to supporting Bear Hollow Wildlife Trail also known as Bear Hollow Zoo, a treasured community resource in Athens, Georgia. FOBH advances the zoo's mission by offering outreach to the community to promote the zoo's operations and events, raising revenue for zoo projects, and nurturing resource-generating partnerships. The Board of FOBH is made up entirely of long-time zoo volunteers, a number of whom have worked at Bear Hollow Zoo in the past, including Board President Jenny Kvapil, who was the Zoo Program Specialist for almost four years.

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