



Chief Financial Officer  
Houston Zoo  
Houston, Texas

## THE SEARCH

The Houston Zoo, one of the nation's most visited and respected zoological institutions, seeks a visionary, collaborative, and mission-driven Chief Financial Officer (CFO). Ranked among the top zoos in the country and recognized globally for its leadership in wildlife conservation and education, the Houston Zoo welcomes more than two million visitors annually and strives to be a Zoo for all.

This is a rare opportunity to join a premier conservation organization in one of the country's most culturally rich cities at a pivotal moment. As the largest conservation education organization in Texas, the Houston Zoo has been committed to the highest standard of animal care and wildlife conservation for decades. In 2023, the Zoo reached a historic milestone with the conclusion of its ["Keeping Our World Wild"](#) centennial campaign, exceeding the targeted goal of \$150 million and fueling investments in state-of-the-art, award-winning animal exhibits, exceptional animal care, and impactful conservation and education programming.

The Houston Zoo's impact extends well beyond its campus. A recent economic study found that in 2023 alone, the Zoo generated \$310 million and created more than 2,100 jobs in the Houston metro area through local business support, tourism initiatives, and capital projects. Additionally, the Zoo supports 33 wildlife conservation projects in 17 countries, contributing over \$4 million to long-term efforts that protect species and habitats worldwide. With a strong balance sheet, a rare [perfect reaccreditation inspection](#) by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), and a record [five Top Honors awards](#) for excellence in conservation, education, sustainability, exhibit design, and inclusion efforts, the Houston Zoo is setting a new standard for zoological institutions worldwide.

Reporting to President and CEO, Lisa Peterson, who joined the Zoo in June 2025, the CFO will be a key partner in advancing the Zoo's mission through long-term financial planning, wealth creation, and operational excellence. As the Zoo wraps up its [Strategic Plan 2023–25: Shaping Our Second Century](#) and prepares for the next phase of growth, the CFO will play a central role in shaping the Zoo's financial strategy, culture, and systems.

The ideal candidate is a strategic thinker and relationship builder who brings both business acumen and a people-first leadership style. They will be energized by the opportunity to modernize systems, streamline processes, and foster a culture of service, transparency, and empowerment across the organization. With a strong sense of stewardship and a collaborative spirit, the CFO will help unlock innovation, strengthen financial decision-making across teams, and ensure the Zoo's long-term sustainability -- while championing its mission to connect communities with animals and inspire action to save wildlife.

The Houston Zoo has retained Isaacson, Miller, a national executive search firm, to assist in conducting this important search and to help identify outstanding candidates. All inquiries, applications, and nominations for this opportunity should be directed to the search firm as indicated at the end of this document.

## ROLE OF THE CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER

Reporting to the President and CEO, the CFO serves as a key strategic partner and financial steward for the Houston Zoo. The CFO leads the Finance division, including Accounting, Purchasing, and Financial Planning & Analysis, and manages a team of nine professionals.

As the principal fiscal advisor to the CEO, executive leadership, and the Board of Directors, the CFO provides staff support to the Board's Finance, Investment, and Audit Committees. This role requires active engagement in strategic discussions, offering data-driven insights and best practices to guide decision-making and long-term planning.

The CFO will lead the annual budgeting process in collaboration with key stakeholders across the organization, ensuring alignment with strategic priorities and fostering a culture of transparency and shared ownership. In addition, the CFO monitors and reports on operating results throughout the year to ensure the financial health of the Zoo. They will analyze long-range financial trends to project impact on future growth related to fees and program revenue, grants, and donations. The CFO also plays a key role in financial risk management, compliance, and governance, ensuring that financial practices meet internal standards and external regulatory requirements.

## KEY OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR THE CFO

### **Align financial strategy with the Zoo's ambition, embracing mission-aligned wealth creation**

The Houston Zoo is entering a transformative chapter with a bold conservation vision, a new CEO, and a facilities master plan that will shape its next century. The CFO will serve as a strategic partner to the CEO and senior leadership team, moving beyond traditional finance responsibilities to align financial decisions with mission and long-term growth. This includes contributing to the next strategic and capital master plans, partnering with the Chief Philanthropy Officer to support a future capital campaign, and working closely with the Chief Operating Officer to develop multi-year capital funding mechanisms. The CFO will

also shape a forward-looking endowment strategy and optimize asset use to sustain and expand mission-driven work. Managing and growing the Zoo's investment portfolio will be critical, requiring close collaboration with the Investment Committee and Hirtle Callaghan investment firm to set parameters, track performance, and optimize asset allocation for both liquidity and growth.

This is a rare opportunity to apply financial leadership to help the Zoo realize its full potential as both a global conservation leader and a beloved Houston institution. To succeed, the CFO must bring a visionary mindset, someone who sees wealth creation as essential to support conservation, education, and community engagement.

### **Champion a collaborative and empowering financial culture**

The CFO will be as much a builder of people as of systems, fostering a culture of growth, trust, and shared ownership. This leader will develop and empower a high-performing finance team, equipping staff to take on larger roles within the organization or beyond, and modeling "employer of choice" leadership through mentorship and talent development.

Equally important is a collaborative, creative, and curious mindset. The CFO will position finance as a service-oriented partner, approaching challenges with a solution-driven spirit and working across teams to find innovative paths forward. By fostering transparency and building financial acumen across the organization, the CFO will enable leaders to make informed decisions and align resources with strategic priorities, ensuring finance is a catalyst for mission impact. With labor representing a significant part of the Zoo's overall budget, the CFO will work closely with the Chief Human Resources Officer to provide tools, insights, and guidance that help executives manage labor costs, overtime, and workforce planning effectively. Accountability for labor management will remain with each executive and their team, while the CFO and CHRO serve as strategic partners to support sound decision-making.

### **Modernize systems and navigate operational complexity to enable growth**

The Zoo is undergoing a significant technology transformation, including upgrades to ERP and CRM systems, and the next CFO will play a central role in this evolution. This leader will ensure financial systems are integrated, future-ready, and aligned with organizational needs. This includes revamping processes for cash management and revenue tracking across admissions, concessions, and operations, while building a robust data infrastructure to support analytics, automation, and smarter decision-making across the organization.

At the same time, the CFO must navigate the unique complexity of a living campus with 24/7 operations, a public-private partnership with the City of Houston, and a dynamic funding landscape. Success will require balancing precision with adaptability—supporting infrastructure, maintenance, and long-term planning while understanding the political and funding environment at the state and federal levels.

### Support external engagement with confidence and clarity

The CFO will serve as a trusted voice alongside the CEO, communicating financial strategy in ways that build trust, inspire investment, and strengthen relationships with board members, city officials, donors, and external partners. This leader will be adept at translating complex financial concepts into clear, compelling narratives that align with the Zoo's mission and vision, ensuring stakeholders understand not just the numbers, but the impact behind them. By bringing credibility, clarity, and strategic insights to every interaction, the CFO will help position the Zoo for continued growth and philanthropic success.

## QUALIFICATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

The ideal candidate will bring proven expertise in short- and long-range financial modeling, forecasting, analysis, budget planning, endowment management, internal controls, and financial presentation. The successful CFO will demonstrate the ability to lead effectively within a highly complex organization and share a deep appreciation for conservation and the role of zoos in advancing this mission.

While no one candidate will meet all the desired criteria, the successful candidate will bring most of the following qualifications and attributes:

- Bachelor's degree in finance, business administration, or related field.
- 10+ years of progressive financial management experience, including oversight of accounting, purchasing, FP&A, and staff leadership.
- Proven ability to lead financial strategy in a complex and sizable private or public organization.
- Nonprofit experience, particularly with capital projects and campaigns, is preferred, though candidates from corporate or government sectors are strongly encouraged to apply.
- Demonstrated ability to build and develop high-performing teams and deliver results through others.
- Experience with sophisticated fund and grant accounting, compliance, and reporting.
- Strong analytical skills and the ability to translate strategic vision into operational models.
- Proven experience leading organizational change, preferably involving CRM and/or ERP system transformation.
- A proactive, flexible style with evidence of working as a true business partner to the CEO, the COO, and the senior leadership team.
- Outstanding written and verbal communication skills, including proficiency in presentations, active listening, and conflict management.

## APPLICATIONS, INQUIRIES, AND NOMINATIONS

Screening of complete applications will begin immediately and continue until the position is filled. Inquiries, nominations, referrals, and application packets (resume and letter of interest) should be directed electronically in confidence to:

Micah Pierce, Partner  
Phuong Ta, Managing Associate  
Marlyn Desire, Senior Search Coordinator  
Isaacson, Miller

<https://www.imsearch.com/open-searches/houston-zoo/chief-financial-officer>

*The Houston Zoo is a Zoo for All. Being a destination of choice for our community and visitors of all backgrounds while being a workplace of choice means having a culture that naturally integrates the tenets of Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility.*

*Joining our Houston Zoo family means promoting a culture of mutual care and respect and striving to make the most meaningful and positive impact.*

*Our mission of connecting communities with animals, inspiring action to save wildlife is ingrained in who we are — it's how we care, grow, and succeed together as one team to become a leader in the global movement to save wildlife.*

## APPENDIX I - ABOUT THE HOUSTON ZOO

Founded in 1922 as the Hermann Park Zoo, the Houston Zoo began as a city-owned and operated facility located within Hermann Park, adjacent to Houston's downtown museum district. In the decades that followed, the Zoo became a locally beloved family-friendly destination.

In January 1989, the Zoo was accredited by the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums – now the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) – and initiated a public admission fee for the first time. In 1993, it expanded to its current footprint of 55 acres and unveiled its first modern immersion exhibit with the opening of the Wortham World of Primates. However, the Zoo did not have the resources or flexibility to keep pace with the changing requirements of a well-run, modern Zoo focused on animal welfare and conservation.

In 2002, the Zoo became a private non-profit organization (Houston Zoo, Inc.) under a 50-year lease and operating agreement with the City of Houston that provides the Zoo with an annual management fee. This public-private partnership has allowed the Zoo to invest in ambitious and wide-ranging capital improvements and uphold high professional standards in animal care, education, and conservation.

Today, the Houston Zoo is the largest conservation education organization in the state of Texas and one of the most visited cultural attractions in Houston, welcoming more than two million visitors annually, ranking it among the top ten zoos in the country in attendance. Open 363 days a year, the Zoo is home to 4,734 animals representing 560 species. Striving to be a “zoo for all,” the institution offers twelve free admission days throughout the year, free admission for organized school groups, deeply discounted tickets for individuals enrolled in the Texas Lone Star program, and other discounts and programs. In 2023, only 34% of the Zoo's 2.1 million patrons paid full price for admission, reflecting the Zoo's dedication to accessibility.

The Zoo's conservation mission extends far beyond its gates. Since launching its Wildlife Conservation Program in 2004, the Zoo has become a leader in global conservation efforts, supporting 33 projects in 17 countries by dedicating at least 6% of annual operating revenue and contributing over \$4 million in 2023 alone. Staff actively participate in AZA's Species Survival Plan and collaborate internationally through the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA). The Zoo also drives groundbreaking research, including a long-standing partnership with Baylor College of Medicine to combat elephant endotheliotropic herpes virus (EEHV). This collaboration, now involving Johns Hopkins University and the Smithsonian National Zoological Park, achieved a major milestone in 2024 with the development and initial doses of an EEHV vaccine, advancing both animal and human health.

Recently, the Zoo has made significant strides in creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment for staff, guests, and the community. Measured by a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access (DEIA) survey which had a 92% staff participation rate, over 79% of respondents indicated that staff are satisfied with the Zoo's culture, agree that Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA) is valued, that they can be their authentic selves at work, and that all cultures and backgrounds are welcomed. Each of these

statements saw a positive rating increase ranging from 2% to 10% compared to the previous year's survey. A staff-led IDEA committee has introduced improvements in DEIA training and ensured more inclusive hiring practices. This clear commitment and the measurable improvements made across key indicators underscore the strong progress and broad impact of the Zoo's DEIA initiatives.

High-quality programming for animal care and well-being remains a hallmark of the Houston Zoo. A 16-member hospital team—including five full-time wildlife veterinarians—provides medical care for the Zoo's collection and assists with injured or confiscated wild animals. Recent milestones include the successful hatching of critically endangered species such as radiated tortoises, a northern white-cheeked gibbon (a first for the Zoo), and the Malagasy sacred ibis chick—the first in North America.

Education is equally central to the Zoo's mission. Each year, animal keepers host more than 4,500 "Meet the Keeper" talks and tours, and welcome over 70,000 students on school field trips. Programs range from summer camps and internships to distance learning and hands-on conservation experiences, ensuring engagement for all ages and communities.

### **Transformational Capital Projects**

The Houston Zoo has undergone a remarkable transformation in recent years, driven by its bold strategic vision and commitment to conservation. In 2019, the Zoo opened the Texas Wetlands habitat and Cypress Circle Café, marking the start of an intensive period of capital development. This momentum continued with the 2020 debut of the award-winning [South America's Pantanal exhibit](#)—a 4.2-acre immersive experience that transports guests to Brazil's tropical wetlands and showcases species such as capybaras, tapirs, giant anteaters, and rheas in a dynamic multi-species environment.

In 2023, the Zoo unveiled the [Galápagos Islands exhibit](#), the world's first major conservation-focused habitat inspired by the legendary archipelago. Spanning 2.5 acres, this groundbreaking exhibit features Galápagos tortoises, California sea lions, Humboldt penguins, reef sharks, and more, while educating visitors on ocean conservation and the impact of plastic pollution.

The transformation continued in 2024 with the opening of [Birds of the World](#), the final animal habitat in the Zoo's "Keeping Our World Wild" Centennial Campaign. This exhibit celebrates avian diversity through three multi-species aviaries representing the African Savanna, North American Woodlands, and South American Wetlands. Complementing this experience is the new Avian Conservation Environment (ACE), a state-of-the-art facility supporting breeding programs for critically endangered species like the blue-billed curassow and Saint Vincent parrot.

Beyond animal habitats, the Zoo invested in infrastructure designed for sustainability and operational excellence. Its new headquarters, HZHQ, consolidates administrative offices and parking in a five-story, 145,925-square-foot facility that earned LEED Gold certification. Features such as bird-friendly glass and dark-sky compliant lighting reflect the Zoo's commitment to wildlife protection. This project also addressed long-standing parking challenges with a dedicated structure for staff and visitors, earning the Houston Business Journal's 2024 Landmark Award for Headquarters Move.

In July 2025, the Zoo celebrated the opening of [Jack's Café](#), a stunning 18,588-square-foot café and event space built on the former sea lion habitat. Designed with eco-friendly features, including bird-safe glass, composting systems, and an 18,000-gallon rainwater collection system, the café offers seating for 165 guests and family-friendly amenities. This \$18.9 million project capped the Zoo's \$156 million Centennial Campaign, which exceeded its ambitious goal and funded Phase I of a 20-year master plan.

### **Economic Impact and Community Recognition**

The Houston Zoo is a major contributor to Houston's economy, sourcing goods and services locally whenever possible, such as 500,000 pounds of herbivore feed from Texas farms, and attracting visitors from across the region. Nearly 24% of guests come from outside the metropolitan area, generating significant economic activity through lodging, dining, and transportation. Construction projects further amplify this impact by creating local jobs and stimulating vendor partnerships.

The Zoo's achievements have earned widespread recognition, including a sister-zoo partnership with Taipei Zoo and leadership honors from the Houston Business Journal, the Association of Fundraising Professionals Greater Houston Chapter, and the Public Relations Society of America.

### **Strategic Plan 2023-2025**

As the Zoo enters its second century, its Strategic Plan, [Shaping Our Second Century](#), focuses on four priorities:

1. Advance conservation to save wildlife
2. Provide outstanding care to animals
3. Deliver meaningful experiences
4. Enhance organizational excellence

Central to this vision is the Facilities Master Plan, now in development and designed to be implemented in phases. This plan will reimagine the Zoo's campus into a series of immersive zones, each telling stories about wildlife and ecosystems from around the world. Guests will experience innovative habitats and engaging conservation messaging at every turn, while animals benefit from optimal living environments and enhanced care facilities.

Phase I of the Master Plan is complete, and the next phase will introduce major renovations and additions to support the Zoo's strategic direction. The future Houston Zoo will be a deliberate, all-weather destination that offers a more immersive, impactful experience for guests and world-class care for animals.

### **Leadership, Governance, and Finance**

The Houston Zoo, Inc. is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation governed by a highly engaged 37-member Board of Directors, which meets four times a year. Members are nominated by the Board Governance



Committee and elected by the full Board. In addition, the Mayor of Houston appoints seven members, typically at the recommendation of Zoo leadership. Directors serve up to two three-year terms.

In June 2025, Lisa Peterson joined the Houston Zoo as President and CEO, bringing more than 27 years of executive experience, primarily in hospitality. Since 2017, she has led the San Diego Zoo Safari Park as senior vice president and executive director—the first woman in that role in its 52-year history. There, she drove conservation efforts like the Walkabout Australia habitat and oversaw the development of the park’s largest-ever project, Elephant Valley, for elephant conservation. She serves as a board member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, contributing to both the Animal Population Management and Finance Committees, where her inclusive leadership and mentorship of future conservation leaders stand out alongside her commitment to community building at home and abroad. Lisa previously held leadership roles at Apple and as regional vice president at White Lodging, where she built a reputation for exceptional teamwork and guest experiences.

The Zoo’s current executive team includes the CEO, COO, CFO, Chief Advancement Officer, Chief Human Resources Officer, Senior Vice President of Marketing, Communications & Technology, Vice President of Animal Operations, and Vice President of Conservation and Education. Together, they lead a diverse team of over 400 full-time and part-time staff, supported by over 600 volunteers.

The Zoo maintains a strong financial position and is well-prepared for future growth and success. Historically, annual revenues have grown each year, and the Zoo has effectively funded major renovation and construction projects, as well as global conservation efforts. In 2024, the Zoo’s expenses approached \$54.9 million, while operating revenue surpassed \$70.1 million, including over \$9.6 million in membership-related revenue, almost \$5.3 million in philanthropic contributions, \$12 million in miscellaneous income, supplementing almost \$39 million in earned revenue.

## APPENDIX II - LOCATION

Houston, the fourth-largest city in the U.S., is a dynamic and diverse metropolis known as the energy capital of the world. It boasts more Fortune 500 headquarters than any city except New York and Chicago, and is home to vibrant performing and visual arts communities. The Houston Zoo is located in Hermann Park within the Texas Medical Center—the world’s largest medical complex—just minutes from downtown and the city’s renowned museum district. NASA’s Johnson Space Center, the hub for human spaceflight training and research, is only 25 miles away.

Houston is one of only six U.S. cities with resident professional companies in all four major performing arts: ballet, opera, theater, and symphony. Cultural treasures include the Museum of Fine Arts, the Museum of Natural Science, and the Menil Collection, alongside a thriving arts scene and world-class dining.

Outdoor enthusiasts enjoy 52,912 acres of parkland—the most among the nation’s 10 largest cities—plus 300 miles of interconnected bikeways and the Houston B-Cycle bike share program. The Armand Bayou

Nature Center, Hermann Park, the Houston Zoo, Cypress Trails, and the Mercer Arboretum and Botanical Gardens are just some of the many serene and beautiful landmarks to explore.

Houston is also the most ethnically and culturally diverse city in North America, with a population that is 37% Hispanic, 31% European American, 25% African American, and 7% Asian American. As one of the top destinations for immigrants to the U.S., Houston offers a rich cultural fabric and an exciting, inclusive environment to live and work.

*This document has been prepared based on the information provided by the Houston Zoo. The material presented in this leadership profile should be relied on for informational purposes only. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this information, the original source documents and information provided by the Houston Zoo would supersede any conflicting information in this document.*