



ZOO
knoxville

Search for the President and Chief Executive Officer



ISAACSON, MILLER

Mission

Zoo Knoxville delivers dynamic guest experiences while inspiring action for wildlife and wild places.

Vision

Be THE destination for fun, learning, and memories that last a lifetime.

SEARCH OVERVIEW

Zoo Knoxville (“the Zoo”), a treasured zoo and integral part of the Knoxville community, seeks a visionary and collaborative leader as its next President & Chief Executive Officer (“CEO”). This leader will guide the Zoo to take full advantage of the growth and momentum in the Knoxville metro and surrounding areas and to lead economic and community development in the Zoo’s immediate neighborhood. The Zoo is staffed, resourced, and supported to continue its positive trajectory with a savvy leader at the helm.



Zoo Knoxville is committed to sharing wildly fun experiences that educate and inspire. Combined with the goal of saving animals from extinction, both locally and globally, the Zoo blends fun with a seriousness of purpose, and the new President & CEO will put these ideals at the forefront of their leadership. Zoo Knoxville is a sophisticated Zoo featuring an increasing number of captivating exhibits, and the new CEO

will build upon its reputation for both animal care and community engagement, supported by a strong vision and stable finances.

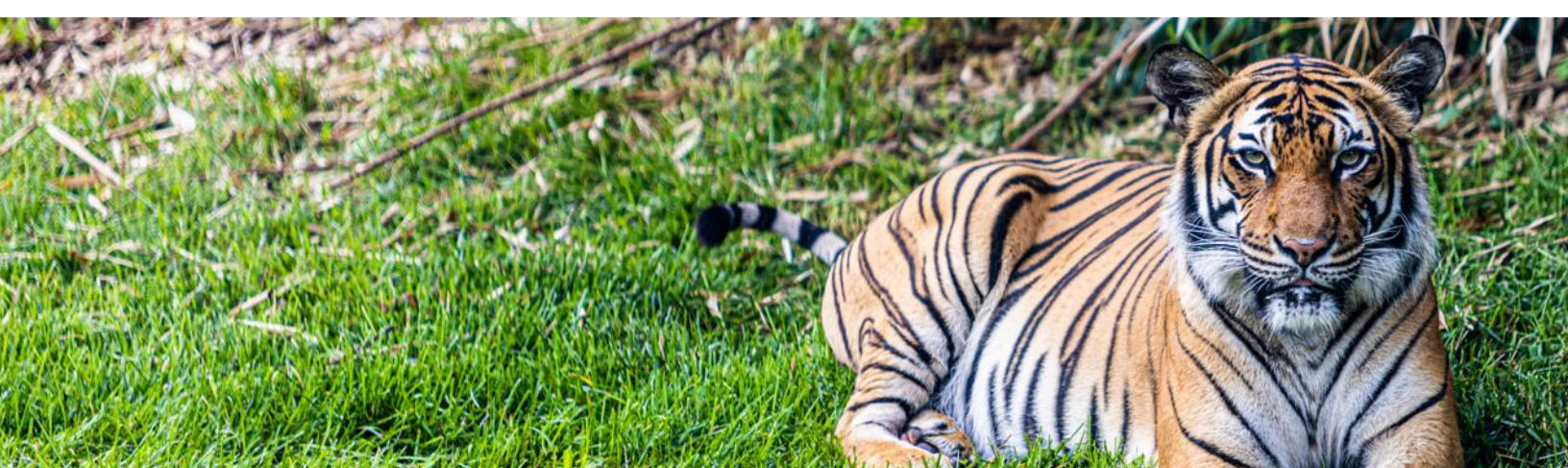
Zoo Knoxville is home to approximately 1,500 [animals](#) and 12 major [exhibits](#) spanning over 53 wooded acres. As a result of the most recent capital campaign that ended successfully in 2021, new exhibits and other capital improvements are in progress. The Zoo's attendance reached a record of over 591,000 in 2023, and a new master plan and the Zoo's conservation work plan are near final. The Zoo is a private 501(c)(3), governed by an engaged and supportive Board of Directors.

The new President & CEO will assume leadership at a time of great momentum for Zoo Knoxville and the broader Knoxville community. The City of Knoxville is growing in population daily, and the Zoo is an integral nonprofit in the region. Located in Chilhowee Park and East Knoxville, areas of potential investment in the years to come, the Zoo is poised to be a key contributor to the revitalization of Chilhowee Park, helping to shape Knoxville for future generations. The new CEO will play a significant role in these plans and their implementation while ensuring the continued successful operation of the Zoo.

Zoo Knoxville is assisted by Isaacson, Miller, a national executive search firm, in this important search. Inquiries, nominations, and applications should be directed in confidence to the search firm.

ZOO KNOXVILLE

Knoxville Zoo is accredited by the national Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) and focuses on its mission of delivering dynamic guest experiences while inspiring action to save wildlife and wild places. More red pandas have been born in Knoxville than any other zoo in the world. Since the birth of Little Diamond, the first African elephant born in the Western Hemisphere, Knoxville Zoo has gone on to other firsts, including being the first zoo in the world to hatch critically endangered northern spider tortoises. Zoo Knoxville was also the first zoo in the world to successfully breed the second generation of captive-born Arakan Forest turtles and common spider tortoises, an important contribution to the science of conservation.



Situated just east of downtown Knoxville and close to the [Great Smoky Mountains National Park](#), the Zoo serves as one of the most popular attractions in east Tennessee. Community members and tourists alike visit to [see the animals](#), experience the natural world, engage with family and friends, and expand their understanding of people's role in ensuring animals continue to thrive.

Growth, Momentum, and Influence

Recent years have been marked by significant growth for the Zoo, leading to its continued ascent in distinction and standing as a prominent zoo and community partner. Notable distinctions include:

- The [Clayton Family Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Campus](#) (ARC), which opened in 2021, received the [AZA Top Exhibit Honors Award](#) in 2022 for excellence in design innovation. The ARC Campus is one of the top conservation centers in the country, working to save threatened and endangered species.
- The five-year capital campaign, *Dream Wilder*, was launched in 2016 and exceeded its original goal of \$30 million to raise \$37.5 million, with 65% coming from private donors and the rest from city and county support. The outcomes of this campaign are significant and have led to exciting new projects and cemented a sound financial position for the Zoo, including an impressive fiscal surplus.
- The Zoo set a new attendance record in 2023, representing a 30% increase since 2019, welcoming 591,131 visitors.
- The Ravine, a project which includes a nighttime immersion activity as well as a venue for group sales opportunities, will be completed in 2025.
- *Dawn of the Dinosaurs*, a special exhibit, brought in 390,000 guests from 45 states in 2023. In spring 2024, the Zoo will welcome the special exhibit, *Predators*.
- In 2023, the Zoo contributed \$58 million to the local economy.



Organizational Structure and Governance

Zoo Knoxville is a 501 (C)(3) chartered by the state of Tennessee and contracted by the City of Knoxville to manage the operations of the zoo facility, which is located on city property. The contract with the city ensures about 10% of operational costs are covered annually. The city regularly supports beyond this commitment for other improvements and renovations. The Zoo also secures capital support from Knox County. Currently, approximately 20% of the Zoo's funding comes from city and county sources.

The Zoo is led by a [dedicated and talented Board of Directors](#), which is responsible for the organization's overall financial strategy and strategic direction. A [leadership team](#) comprised of seven individuals and an exceptional staff of approximately 230 full- and part-time employees work to build and maintain a culture of community and excellence for animals, guests, and employees alike.

Conservation

Zoo Knoxville is committed to being part of the solution to save species from extinction, both locally and globally. As a proud member of the [AZA SAFE \(Saving Animals from Extinction\) program](#), the Zoo currently participates in six SAFE programs. These include the North American Turtle (Founding Member), Radiated Tortoise (Founding Member), Monarch Butterfly (Founding Member), American Red Wolf (Participated in reintroduction program in 2022), African Lion, and North American Songbird. Zoo Knoxville is also focused on ensuring the survival of species, including the critically endangered bog turtle, Malagasy tortoises, red pandas, and more. More information about the Zoo's conservation efforts can be [found here](#).



Community Engagement and Impact

The Zoo is an integral part of the local community and works to encourage access and participation from all in Knoxville. In 2022, the Zoo was the partner of the Knox County Public Library with the most utilized “Explorer’s Pass,” which provided free admission to more than 800 families. Over 800 youth and adult volunteers work at the Zoo, supporting educational and other programs. In 2022, over 1,250 educational programs served 50,234 youth and adults, and 34,993 participants attended field trips to expand their horizons while enjoying nature.

The economic impact of the Zoo in the local area is significant. Between 2017 and 2021, Zoo Knoxville generated \$189.6 million in direct spending in Knox County, with a combined direct and indirect impact of \$329.1 million. Over this five-year period, activities related to the Zoo resulted in \$25.6 million in state and local tax revenues and an average of 570 jobs each year.



Positioning the Zoo for the Future

Zoo Knoxville is at an exciting moment in its trajectory of growth and recognition. The Master Plan Vision, developed in 2022 with [CRL Design](#) and its accompanying business plan, developed with [Canopy Strategic Partners](#), focuses on improvements to maintain a healthy financial future and support the mission of

Zoo Knoxville

conservation by developing experiences that drive attendance and enhance community partnerships. The earliest phase of the vision focuses on strategic programming and smaller-scale projects, including the Macaw Aviary, the final project of the Dream Wilder Campaign; an immersive experience in an under-utilized area of the Zoo; habitat enhancements to Grasslands Africa for new species and expansion of giraffes; improvements to the red wolf habitat and former Tiger Tops restaurant area; and the introduction of limited run experiences and exhibits. Phase two, which could begin as early as 2027, aims to deliver major projects such as an improved main entrance, an east campus animal exhibit, and more. Underscoring all proposed improvements is an eye toward community benefits, contributing to the overall economy and the growth of the Zoo's home in Chilhowee Park.

The Zoo is already taking steps to build out systems and processes to support growth in attendance and expansion of exhibits, including the establishment of a [new retail partner](#) and the installation of a [new ticketing and CRM vendor](#). These upgrades will provide leadership with more data for planning and decision making. Zoo Knoxville's next AZA accreditation visit will occur in 2025, and work is already underway to prepare for the process. The Macaw Aviary is under construction, as is a new program animal building. The Ravine, which will include a nighttime immersion activity highlighting the wonder and beauty of East Tennessee while also serving as a venue for group sales opportunities, will be completed in 2025. All these pieces are part of the significant momentum at Zoo Knoxville, which the new CEO will harness and build upon.

More about the history and present-day attributes of the Zoo, as well as information about living in Knoxville, can be found in the appendix.



ROLE OF THE PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Reporting to the Board of Directors, the President & CEO oversees the Zoo's activities and operations in support of its mission of providing impactful and entertaining guest experiences while inspiring action to save wildlife and wild places. The specific areas for which this position is responsible include all departments related to the 53-acre facility: finance and human resources; operations; guest experience; marketing and communications; animals, education and conservation; and development. The President & CEO will provide strategic leadership and vision matched with sound resource allocation and financial planning across the enterprise. The overarching challenges for the next President and CEO are both internally and externally focused and grounded in leveraging the positive momentum of growth, recognition, and engagement toward even greater impact.



The broad objectives for the Zoo's new President & Chief Executive Officer are as follows:

Grow Zoo membership and attendance through local and regional expansion and recognition.

The Zoo set a record in attendance in 2023, welcoming 591,131 visitors, and is poised to further this success. The CEO will strategically oversee and lead this endeavor, ensuring that growth is aligned with infrastructure and resources that can support additional guests. Concurrently, the CEO will have the opportunity to shape the future direction of the master plan to accommodate this growth.

Opportunities exist to expand attendance both locally and regionally. Locally, the CEO will examine and enhance the current membership model with the goal of expanding the membership base while maximizing the benefit to both the Zoo and the membership.

Regionally, Zoo Knoxville is an established local gem, valued by members of the local community and on the brink of becoming a prominently regionally recognized zoo. Regional tourism is vibrant and growing, and the Zoo's location in proximity to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the city of Knoxville, combined with its setting adjacent to local attractions, including Muse Knoxville Children's Museum, should be leveraged to elevate the Zoo's profile as a tourist destination. The CEO will champion new and existing relationships with external partners, including government, businesses, nonprofits, and community organizations, to increase recognition as a valued partner and destination across the region.

Energize philanthropy efforts on behalf of the Zoo in the external community to support future phases of the strategic vision.

Zoo Knoxville is at a moment of financial security and growth due to the success of the previous campaign, forward-thinking leadership, and financial stewardship. To support its continued trajectory of growth, the Zoo will need to engage in additional fundraising leading up to a new campaign, likely to launch soon after the master plan is approved. The CEO will instill a sense of excitement and purpose around fundraising and lead in building relationships with existing and new donors in the Knoxville community. The CEO will be able to harness the energy and talent of the Zoo's Board of engaged community leaders to amplify success in this area.



Zoo Knoxville

Integrate the Zoo into the city of Knoxville's economic development plan while continuing and enhancing productive community relationships.

Relationships with the external community, including with Zoo neighbors, city and county officials, peer institutions, and others, are of the utmost importance for the Zoo and underscore the Zoo's important role in the vitality of East Knoxville and Chilhowee Park specifically. As the external representative, the CEO will proactively build mutually beneficial relationships while championing the Zoo as a destination and a resource. The CEO will have a unique opportunity to be part of planning for the next chapter of Chilhowee Park. Success for the Zoo and Park are mutually beneficial and together provide an opportunity to contribute to the revitalization of East Knoxville.



Ensure effective leadership and management throughout the organization, promoting high morale and a sense of shared purpose.

The Zoo Knoxville board, leadership, and staff are engaged and committed to their work and the community they serve. The next CEO will promote transparent and accessible communication and collaboration within the Zoo and between the Zoo and the Board so that all parts of the enterprise are well-informed and aligned. The CEO will leverage the energy and talent of the board in moving the Zoo forward while serving as the voice of the Board to Zoo leadership and staff. The CEO will also represent the Zoo leadership and staff interest to the Board, aligning sometimes differing opinions for the benefit of the Zoo. Zoo staff are dedicated to the mission and would benefit from a leader adept at breaking down silos and improving communication between groups. A culture of accessibility and trust is paramount, and opportunities for employee engagement, professional development, and engagement within the AZA should be encouraged by the CEO.

QUALIFICATIONS AND EXPERIENCE

For this pivotal role, Zoo Knoxville will search broadly for a leader with proven experience effectively managing a complex and growing organization. The new President and CEO will embrace the Zoo's mission and values and will boldly yet collaboratively galvanize the talented Zoo staff, the Board, and the community as the Zoo moves toward its next chapter.



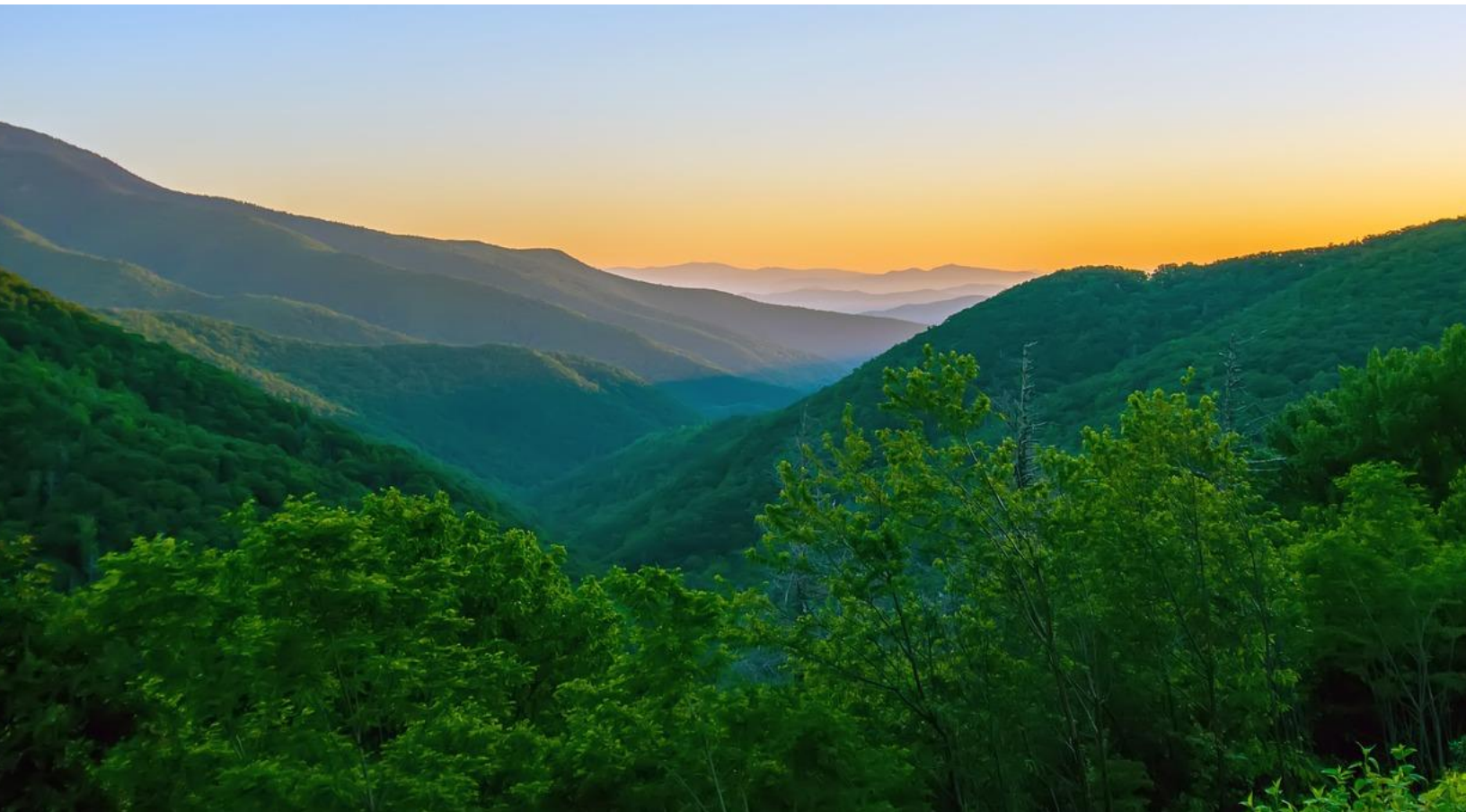
Experience

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

- Track record of providing visionary leadership and effective management in an AZA-accredited zoo or aquarium;
- Track record of building and sustaining innovative partnerships and working with diverse stakeholders, including community members, public officials, board members, and professional colleagues;
- Proven success in fundraising and philanthropy and an appetite for raising funds;
- Outstanding demonstrated skills in internal and external communication, team building, and staff development;
- Proven business acumen—discipline and focus in setting realistic priorities, meeting or beating goals, running a fiscally sound operation, and managing in a complex environment;
- Demonstrated experience working collaboratively and facilitating collaboration between internal and external stakeholders, including staff, community groups, boards, and local government.

Attributes

- Enthusiasm and ambition for the varied, multi-faceted work of Zoo Knoxville and the Knoxville area;
- Public presence, exceptional communication skills, and the ability to be a persuasive, outgoing spokesperson, diplomat, and ambassador for the Zoo;
- An outgoing and positive personality, strong interpersonal skills to work effectively with the full range of constituents;
- Imagination, boundless curiosity, tenacity, gracious self-confidence, flexibility, good humor, and high energy, as well as high emotional intelligence and impeccable integrity.



APPLICATIONS, INQUIRIES, AND NOMINATIONS

Review of candidates will begin immediately and continue until the completion of the search process. Inquiries, nominations, referrals, and applications, including a resume and letter of interest, should be directed electronically in confidence to:

Natalie Leonhard, Partner
Sharon Hansen, Senior Associate
Isaacson, Miller

<https://www.imsearch.com/open-searches/zoo-knoxville/president-and-chief-executive-officer>

Zoo Knoxville is committed to listening, learning, supporting, and protecting human diversity as passionately as we do the diversity of our natural world. It's our differences that make a strong, vibrant, beautiful world. We work to increase access to the zoo for families in our local communities of color and continually improve the zoo as a diverse and inclusive community asset and workplace.

As an employee of Zoo Knoxville, you must possess English communication skills as well as the ability to communicate using a 2-way radio, email, and telephone. The position hours vary depending on business needs and will require weekend and some holiday shifts. Depending on the specific tasks, this position will be required to work within close proximity of exotic and domestic animals and must be aware that there are dangers inherent in working under those conditions. Zoo Knoxville is committed to maintaining a drug-free workplace, and as such, each employee must pass a pre-employment drug screen and background check.



APPENDIX

History

Zoo Knoxville's history is rooted in its connection to the local community, which shaped its current status as a modern, flourishing zoo. What began with a 1923 initiative to create a park for children in need, boosted by a Birthday Fund, is now a pillar in the community and a distinguished gem in the region.

Zoo Knoxville was founded in 1948. Among its early animal residents were an American alligator named "Al," who was visited by 4,000 people on his first day at the Zoo, and an African elephant named Old Diamond, who was donated by Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus. It was soon discovered that the existing facilities were unsuitable for caring for such a large animal, and in 1966, the Metropolitan Planning Commission announced plans for an expanded modern zoo. The local Knoxville Journal rallied the community to raise money to build a barn and suitable facilities for Old Diamond when it was discovered that sufficient funds were unavailable.

Guy Lincoln Smith III, the son of the Knoxville Journal's editor, was a successful television executive. As the old Municipal Zoo seemed to be dissolving, Smith and his wife, Patty, bought a lion cub named Joshua and took care of it until they could raise money to build a proper facility for the rapidly growing lion to live in. At about the same time, Dr. Bill Patterson led the founding of the Appalachian Zoological Society to oversee an educational zoo. The modern Knoxville Zoo was born in 1971. Early milestones include the birth of Little Diamond after Old Diamond was mated with Toto, a younger female. Little Diamond was the first African elephant born in the Western Hemisphere.

Since that time, Zoo Knoxville has continued to serve as a shining light in the Knoxville community, connecting the community to the wonder of animals and the critical role that humans play in ensuring that species continue to thrive across the world.

Accolades and Impactful Exhibits

Zoo Knoxville has been on an exciting trajectory of recognition for its distinctive and impactful exhibits. The [Clayton Family Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Campus](#) (ARC), which opened in 2021, received the [AZA Top Exhibit Honors Award](#) in 2022 for excellence in design innovation, distinguishing it as one of the top zoo exhibits in the world. The ARC Campus is one of the top conservation centers in the country, working to save threatened and endangered species. Also, in 2022, the [Boyd Family Asian Trek](#) was voted one of [the top 10 zoo exhibits in the country](#) by USA Today's 10 Best Readers' Choice awards. The Zoo is also recognized for its [children's programs and educational offerings](#).

Zoo Knoxville

Recent years have seen the addition of several popular exhibits and advancements on the Zoo campus. The Zoo proudly opened [Clayton Otter Creek](#) in 2022, an aquatic habitat featuring several otters who came from rehabilitation situations and were unable to be released into the wild. Featured prominently at the center of the plaza, this exhibit greets guests and serves as an interactive way to build awareness about the importance of clean water. In 2023, the special exhibition [Dawn of the Dinosaurs](#) introduced guests to learn about the living descendants of dinosaurs and how modern animals evolved similar characteristics. New wayfinding was installed, the Graze Food Truck opened, and Zoo staff successfully [rallied to care for Stevie](#), a baby chimp whose mother was unable to care for her due to complications after birth. Stevie is [now thriving](#), and the community enjoys visiting her as she grows.

About Knoxville

Located in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Knoxville, TN, is known for its excellent quality of life with a low cost of living, abundant restaurants, access to nature, and more. It is easily accessible via several interstates and an airport. A popular area for people and families of all ages, Knoxville is growing steadily as word begins to spread about its abundant opportunities and warm, welcoming community. Additional details can be [found here](#).

