



MEMORANDUM

To: Orange County Mayor and Board of County Commissioners

From: Commissioner Nicole Wilson

Date: 5/26/26

Subject: Request for Board Discussion Regarding Sloth World

Countywide Prohibition on the Importation of Exotic Wildlife for Entertainment Purposes

The purpose of this memorandum is to request Board discussion and direction regarding the development of a countywide ordinance prohibiting the importation of exotic wildlife for commercial entertainment purposes within Orange County.

This request is driven by recent events that raised serious concerns regarding animal welfare, public safety, regulatory oversight, and the impact such incidents can have on Orange County's reputation as one of the world's premier tourism destinations.

I am requesting Board action to evaluate necessary gaps in oversight and establish stronger local standards that prioritize responsible tourism, public trust, and humane treatment of animals.

The recent Sloth World tragedy highlighted significant concerns regarding the commercial use and exhibition of exotic wildlife and exposed broader questions regarding whether existing regulatory systems adequately protect animals, consumers, and the public interest.

While state and federal agencies maintain authority over wildlife permitting and interstate transport, the incident demonstrated that compliance with minimum regulatory requirements does not prevent harmful outcomes. It also raised concerns about whether current oversight mechanisms are sufficient for businesses built around public interaction with exotic animals.

Orange County serves as one of the most recognized tourism destinations in the world. Millions of visitors choose our community because of the experiences we offer and because of the trust they place in our institutions and standards. Incidents involving animal neglect, unsafe practices, or the exploitation of wildlife for entertainment purposes do not exist in isolation; they can create lasting reputational consequences that affect our broader tourism brand and economic identity.

When highly visible incidents occur, communities are judged not only by what happened, but by how leadership responds. In the absence of stronger safeguards, Orange County risks a repeat of the recent tragedy.

Where regulatory gaps exist, local government has a responsibility to examine whether additional protections are warranted. While Orange County may not possess authority over every aspect of wildlife regulation, the County does maintain authority over local business activities, land use, licensing, public safety, and community welfare. Those authorities provide an opportunity to evaluate whether businesses importing exotic wildlife for entertainment purposes should be subject to additional local restrictions or prohibited altogether.

The purpose of this effort is not to interfere with legitimate veterinary services, accredited conservation organizations, wildlife rehabilitation efforts, educational institutions, or lawful agricultural activities. Rather, the intent is to evaluate whether commercial entertainment models dependent upon the repeated import and display of exotic wildlife align with Orange County's values and long-term interests.

The State of Florida currently maintains a temporary prohibition on the importation of sloths due to concerns involving disease transmission and animal welfare. This action demonstrates that the State has already recognized circumstances in which limitations on commerce involving wildlife may be necessary to protect broader public interests.

Questions for consideration:

- Could Orange County establish local restrictions that build upon or complement temporary state actions?
- Could local authority be exercised through public safety, land use, or business licensing mechanisms?
- Would such measures face state preemption concerns?

The Board may also wish to evaluate whether this policy could align with existing county code related to retail animal sales and animal-related business activities.

Potential Exemptions

- Accredited zoological institutions
- Wildlife rehabilitation organizations
- Educational institutions
- Veterinary facilities
- Government agencies
- Qualified conservation and sanctuary organizations

Potential Enforcement Mechanisms

- County business licensing requirements

- Conditional use approvals
- Revocation or suspension authority
- Civil penalties
- Code enforcement authority

The Sloth World tragedy should not be viewed as an isolated incident but rather as an opportunity to examine whether gaps exist within the systems intended to protect animals, residents, and visitors. Orange County has an opportunity to demonstrate leadership by establishing policies that reflect community values and support a tourism economy built on responsible and ethical practices.

The world watches what happens in Orange County. Our response should demonstrate that our commitment to public trust, animal welfare, and the integrity of our tourism brand extends beyond reacting to tragedy and includes taking meaningful steps to prevent future harm.

Sincerely,



Nicole H. Wilson
Commissioner, District 1

Cc: County Administrator Byron Brooks, Cheryl Gillepsie