

Beacon Hill Byline – By Rep. Mary Rogeness

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The Zoo in Forest Park

Forest Park had hundreds of thousands of visitors last month during Bright Nights. If you were one of them, you saw the light display of Noah's Ark with images of animals looking out from the fencing of the Zoo. But you did not see the real animals that live in the Zoo.

Governor Cellucci paid a call at the zoo last week to deliver a \$300,000 check to director Rob Gladden. Thanks to that celebratory occasion, I had a peek at the activities going on behind the fence. That visit is the reason for this column urging you to visit the zoo in the coming season. The zoo is closed to the public until February school vacation, but there will be plenty of opportunity to see the animals after that date.

My family remembers the Forest Park Zoo as part of another era. The old zoo, near Trafton Road in Springfield, housed its animals in concrete cages. When my children were young, they could see Snowball the polar bear swim in his small pool. And they could watch Morganetta, the baby elephant. When the expense of keeping the zoo became too much for the city of Springfield, the animals were distributed to other facilities, leaving only the petting zoo. It is that site, the old children's zoo, that is now growing to be a new zoo for the new century.

The governor's visit shows state support for that new zoo. In addition to the \$300,000 check from this year's budget, the governor's new budget recommends another \$300,000 for next year. The state money will be used to develop and support educational programs and to produce an "In Your Back Yard" exhibit that will feature animals indigenous to the region. Two of the featured attractions will surely be the black bears that were taken to Forest Park when they were found alone in the woods a few years ago. They are not from *my* back yard, but black bear sightings are not unusual in Western Massachusetts.

Last year's state appropriation was used to enhance displays and improve the accessibility to exhibits. Those displays include a huge albino python and a darling pair of pygmy hedgehogs that are about the size of a softball.

In place of elephants and polar bears, the zoo now has emus and llamas. And it has lemurs, the governor's personal favorite. On his last trip to our zoo he helped the zookeeper hand-feed grapes to the fuzzy little primates, and he keeps a souvenir stuffed lemur displayed in his office.

If you have not been to the zoo for a while or if your children or grandchildren have seen only the Bright Nights of Forest Park, I hope you will plan a visit this year. You will be glad you did.