

Position Specification

CEO

Grand Rapids, MI

July 2026





CEO

Reporting To	Chair, Board of Directors
Direct Reports	COO and Deputy Director, CFO, CHRO, Vice President of Planning & Sustainability, Vice President of Development
Location	Grand Rapids, MI

John Ball Zoo

For 135 years, John Ball Zoo has been one of the defining cultural institutions of Grand Rapids. Since welcoming its first visitors in 1891, generations of West Michigan families have visited the Zoo, making it one of the region's most enduring and beloved public attractions. Today, the AZA-accredited Zoo welcomes nearly 800,000 guests annually and is recognized for excellence in animal care, conservation, education, and sustainable campus development. From wildlife conservation initiatives across the Great Lakes to partnerships that reach around the globe, John Ball Zoo has become an institution whose influence extends well beyond the community it has served for more than a century.



Situated on 103 acres overlooking downtown Grand Rapids, 31 acres of which are developed for animal habitats and guest experiences, John Ball Zoo is home to nearly 2,000 animals representing more than 220 species from around the world. Governed by a 20-member Board of Directors, the Zoo employs approximately 175 year-round staff in addition to hundreds of seasonal employees and volunteers and operates with an annual budget approaching \$30 million. Approximately one-quarter of the Zoo's operating revenue is provided through a dedicated Kent County zoological millage, with the balance generated through a diversified mix of earned revenue, philanthropy, and grants.



In 2014, Kent County transitioned management of the publicly owned Zoo to the newly formed John Ball Zoo Society. Since that time, annual attendance and operating revenue have tripled, philanthropic investment has surged, and the Zoo has completed an ambitious series of capital projects that have reshaped the campus. Signature additions—including Idema Forest Realm, the award-winning pygmy hippopotamus habitat, the river otter habitat, and numerous other animal habitats and guest amenities—have elevated the visitor experience and established John Ball Zoo as one of the nation's premier mid-sized zoological institutions.

Beyond its remarkable physical transformation, John Ball Zoo has expanded its impact through conservation, education, and environmental stewardship. The Zoo participates in numerous AZA Species Survival Plan® programs and supports conservation initiatives throughout the Great Lakes and around the world. Through its partnership with Grand Rapids Public Schools, Zoo School provides high-achieving sixth grade scholars with an immersive, place-based environmental education, while the Zoo's informal education programs engage tens of thousands of children and families each year. The Zoo's commitment to sustainability is equally evident across its campus. John Ball Zoo was the first zoo in the world to earn Sustainable SITES Initiative Gold certification for an animal habitat and has received national recognition for innovative green infrastructure, sustainable design, and environmental stewardship.



John Ball Zoo now stands at another pivotal moment in its history. Building on the extraordinary growth of the past decade, the Zoo has adopted an ambitious 10-year Master Plan and is advancing a \$55 million comprehensive capital campaign. With renewal of the Kent County zoological millage anticipated this fall and the potential for a regional aquarium on the long-term horizon, the next CEO will have the opportunity to sustain this impressive trajectory while guiding one of North America's most dynamic mid-sized zoological institutions through its next chapter.

About Grand Rapids

Consistently recognized as one of the Midwest's most desirable places to live, Grand Rapids offers an exceptional quality of life, a vibrant economy, and a deeply engaged philanthropic community. Home to approximately 1.2 million residents across the metropolitan area, the region combines the amenities of a major metropolitan center with the affordability, accessibility, and sense of community of a smaller city. More than \$1 billion in transformative downtown investment—including the new Acrisure Amphitheater, a professional soccer stadium, restoration of the Grand River's historic rapids, and mixed-use riverfront development—is reshaping the city's core and reinforcing its reputation as one of the country's most dynamic midsized cities.



Grand Rapids is home to an unusually collaborative business and civic community. Global companies including Amway, MillerKnoll, Steelcase, Acrisure, and Bissel anchor a diverse economy, while institutions such as Grand Valley State University, Calvin University, and Aquinas College contribute to a highly educated workforce and strong talent pipeline. This same spirit of collaboration has helped create one of the nation's strongest philanthropic cultures, where public-private partnerships routinely support transformative investments in education, healthcare, arts and culture, and community development.

The region's cultural offerings rival those of much larger metropolitan areas. Residents enjoy destinations such as Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, the Grand Rapids Art Museum, the Grand Rapids Symphony, and the internationally acclaimed ArtPrize. Grand Rapids is equally known for its award-winning culinary scene, nationally recognized breweries and distilleries, and vibrant downtown neighborhoods. For families, Grand Rapids offers outstanding public and independent schools, four distinct seasons, abundant parks and trails, and easy access to the beaches, dunes, and recreation of Lake Michigan. Combined with its affordability, civic leadership, and exceptional quality of life, Grand Rapids offers an [outstanding place to build both a career and a life](#).

Scope and Responsibilities

Reporting to the Board of Directors through its Chair, the CEO directs, plans, and evaluates all major activities of John Ball Zoo. The CEO provides visionary and strategic leadership in pursuing the Zoo's mission and sustaining its impact. The CEO works collaboratively with all stakeholders to balance and advance a wide range of institutional priorities, including but not limited to: promoting the highest quality and integrity in animal care, advancing contributions to wildlife and ecological conservation, expanding outcomes in public STEM education, deepening relevance in the lives of community members, and catalyzing economic growth in Grand Rapids and Kent County. As the Zoo's chief ambassador, the CEO serves as its primary representative to major donors, business and civic leaders, philanthropic partners, elected officials, the media, and the broader community.

This is an extraordinary opportunity to help shape the next era of a thriving zoo with longstanding stature in a vibrant, fast-growing community. The next CEO will inherit an exceptional product, brand, and legacy and will be supported by a dedicated board, staff, and philanthropic and governmental partners. Key priorities for the next CEO include:



Specific Responsibilities

- Partner with the Board and executive leadership team to establish and execute clear strategic priorities that advance the Zoo's four strategic pillars: Embrace Conservation, Deliver Exceptional Experiences, Achieve Operational Excellence, and Advance Organizational Sustainability.
- Lead implementation of the Zoo's 10-year Master Plan, thoughtfully balancing strategic growth with organizational capacity while ensuring that capital investments align with financial resources and the Zoo's mission.
- Serve as the Zoo's chief fundraiser and external ambassador, cultivating meaningful relationships with individual donors, foundations, corporate partners, elected officials, and community leaders to advance philanthropic support and elevate the Zoo's visibility throughout West Michigan and beyond.
- Strengthen the Zoo's longstanding partnership with Kent County, working collaboratively with County leadership to ensure continued transparency, trust, and alignment in stewarding one of the region's most valued public assets.
- Partner with the Board of Directors to enhance governance, deepen engagement, and strengthen the Board's role as ambassadors, advocates, and philanthropic partners.
- Lead, inspire, and cultivate a high-performing executive leadership team, maximizing the collective impact of its members in pursuit of shared goals.
- Champion excellence in animal welfare, conservation, and education by ensuring the Zoo continues to meet the highest standards of AZA accreditation while expanding its impact through innovative programming, environmental stewardship, and community engagement.
- Ensure the Zoo's long-term financial sustainability through disciplined fiscal management, thoughtful resource allocation, and continued growth of earned and contributed revenue.
- Evaluate emerging opportunities—including the long-term potential for a regional aquarium—and provide thoughtful, strategic leadership as the Zoo continues to evolve to meet the needs of its community and the zoological profession.
- Model and reinforce the Zoo's mission and values, ensuring they are reflected in organizational culture, decision-making, and interactions with guests, partners, and one another.
- Remain actively engaged within the AZA and the broader zoological profession, informed of emerging trends, best practices, and innovative approaches that advance John Ball Zoo's mission, relevance, and long-term success.

Key Selection Criteria

The next CEO of John Ball Zoo will be a visionary and collaborative leader with the strategic perspective, operational acumen, and emotional intelligence to guide one of North America's most dynamic mid-sized zoological institutions through its next chapter of growth. This individual will possess a demonstrated ability to lead complex organizations, inspire high-performing teams, and build trusted relationships across a broad spectrum of stakeholders.

The successful candidate will be a gifted fundraiser and compelling storyteller who enjoys serving as the public face of an organization and has a proven ability to cultivate major individual donors, foundations, corporate partners, and government officials. Equally important will be the ability to balance ambitious vision with disciplined execution—making thoughtful decisions that align resources with strategic priorities.

This leader will possess exceptional business judgment and financial acumen, demonstrating experience overseeing complex operating budgets, capital projects, and long-range financial planning. Experience working with governing boards, navigating public-private partnerships, and building consensus among diverse constituencies will be essential. The ability to earn trust, communicate transparently, and lead with humility and integrity will be critical to long-term success.

Experience leading an AZA-accredited zoo or aquarium—or another comparably complex, mission-driven organization—is strongly preferred. Regardless of professional background, the successful candidate must demonstrate a genuine passion for wildlife conservation, environmental stewardship, public education, and the important role modern zoos play in connecting communities with the natural world.



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