

Group wants to bring giant pandas to Washington state

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A group of enthusiasts who want to bring giant pandas to Washington state say they are encouraged by a favorable response from Chinese President Xi Jinping.

In response to a letter signed by about 40 state lawmakers and presented during Xi's visit to the state in September, Xi directed his government to "engage in preliminary technical exchanges" about transferring a pair of the critically endangered animals.

"I think it would be a good thing for the community," said Ron Chow, the Pierce County businessman who hatched the idea along with former Gov. John Spellman. "But we still have a long way to go."

And it's not clear whether the panda movement will gather popular and financial support.

Animal welfare activists dismissed the plan as cruel, with no benefit to conservation.

A spokeswoman said Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium in Tacoma has no plan to exhibit pandas. And while Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo would love to add the black-and-white bears to its menagerie, it probably can't afford it, said David Schaefer, director of communications and public affairs.

"It's just very, very expensive," he said.

While pandas are a superstar species that draws crowds like no other, zoos must rent each pair for 10 years, at a cost of \$1 million a year. The money is supposed to be used for conservation programs in China, which maintains a captive population of more than 300 animals but has struggled to reintroduce pandas into the wild.

Zoos are also assessed a "baby tax" of \$400,000 for every birth - and the offspring are usually shipped to China around the age of 3.

Only four U.S. zoos - in San Diego, Atlanta, Memphis and Washington, D.C. - have pandas on display. In recent discussions, Chinese officials have been adamant that no more pandas will be coming to the U.S. in the near future, said former WPZ Director David Towne, who serves as president of the North American Panda Foundation.

That's one of the main reasons he's skeptical Washington's bid for a pair will ever get off the ground.

If no local zoos want to house pandas, Chow said advocates could raise money to build their own facility. He has already formed the Washington State Panda Foundation, and is recruiting school kids to support the movement.

"I don't think we will have trouble finding them a home," Chow said.

But it would be hard for any independent facility to get the required permits and licenses from the federal government, Towne pointed out.

Seattle zoo critic Alyne Fortgang said it's selfish to confine animals like pandas for entertainment. She also questioned whether captive breeding will ever benefit populations in the wild.

But if nothing else, the fees paid by U.S. zoos have helped China

protect habitat, which benefits a wide range of other species as well, Towne pointed out.

Still, he doesn't think it makes sense to bring the iconic bears to Washington.

"When I was director of the zoo, I always said: 'No, we don't want pandas.'"

Not only would the zoo have to rent the animals, but it would also have to build a new exhibit and import much of the pandas' food. The Bronx Zoo estimated that it would cost \$50 million over 10 years to mount a panda exhibit.

Chow, who joined Spellman and a few state legislators in announcing the effort Monday, stressed that the group is still testing the waters and will bow to public opinion.

"If 51 percent tell me: 'No,' I will be happy to drop it," he said. "But just do a survey - who would not love [pandas](#)?"

But the final outcome could be more dependent on economics and global politics than emotion. An analysis from the University of Oxford found that all recent panda loans went to countries that had negotiated trade agreements with China.

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