

BUY THE SAME TOKEN

TOKENS TRUMP CASH FOR SOME USES

BY JULIE ROGERS

When officials from the Greater Los Angeles Zoo Association (GLAZA) were planning for their new Conservation Carousel, they knew it was going to be something special. The carousel features 62 hand-carved, wooden animals, including many endangered species, a unicorn, and a princess horse. Gaining admittance to the carousel is as unique as the attraction itself. Instead of paying in cash, patrons purchase collectible carousel tokens. Sales of the tokens exceed the number of rides, with the additional cash funding not only the carousel operations but also conservation projects and other zoo endeavors.

Pricing for a ride on the carousel was set at \$3, but significantly more discussion went into how to handle the transaction. A straight cash transaction was ruled out



The design of the admission token for the Conservation Carousel changes each year, creating new opportunities to sell tokens to collectors.

because a single employee or volunteer would have to handle too much money. Paper tickets were considered but no one was excited about the idea. Seeking something that would have more permanence and that would complement the unique nature of the attraction, GLAZA Vice President and CFO Jeb Bonner suggested tokens.

A zoo employee designed the tokens, choosing an Asian elephant image from a new exhibit on one side and a California Arts and Crafts-style carousel pavilion on the other. Designers at Cincinnati's TokensDirect created the final artwork and the tokens were manufactured.

"We realized right away that this was such a good combination, that we'd issue these on a yearly basis," Bonner said. "We key an animal on the carousel with a major new exhibit or initiative at the zoo. In celebration of the 2012 opening of a new reptile house called the LAIR (Living Amphibians, Invertebrates, and Reptiles), the 2012 token features the poison dart frog. Choosing the 2013 token's feature began with identifying an exhibit they wanted to highlight—the Rainforest of the Americas.

"We're finding that these are becoming quite the collector items," Bonner said. Because tokens aren't common, patrons buy extras as souvenirs or collectibles. The tokens are sold through a pair of Standard Change-Makers token dispensers, which accept cash and credit cards, then dispense tokens as well as make change (dispense bills). Tokens are given to the attendant and put back into circulation.

This poison dart frog figure was the inspiration for the 2012 admission token.



The number of tokens sold exceeds the number of riders. “We purchased 5,000 tokens in the fall, but we upped the order to 10,000 of the poison dart frog. And if we have to remind them halfway through the year, we’ll do so,” Bonner said. Right now, the tokens are only available through the two token dispensers, but they may be sold through the gift shops, along with collector books and souvenir cases.

The tokens have proven to be winners. Patrons love them for their collectible nature and for their souvenir value. Staffers love them because they are easier to handle than cash. And the zoo loves them because the extra token sales are helping to fund additional conservation projects and zoo initiatives. ■■■■



The hand-carved wooden Conservation Carousel at the Los Angeles Zoo uses collectible tokens for admission.