

Mr. chairman and committee members thank you for the opportunity today to present my thoughts on the 2022/2023 Ontario budget priorities as they affect my business and my sector.

As introduced moments ago, my name is Paul Goulet, along with my wife we have owned a family business for the past 26 years. Our mission has been to inspire people of all ages through thought provoking educational programming dispelling myths and misconceptions about many species while advocating for responsible pet ownership all while operating the largest exotic animal rescue organization in Canada. Our humble beginnings grew to employing over 117 staff members when the pandemic hit in 2020.

I am hoping to paint a picture for you of the business climate we are operating in and outline our challenges and steps the government should take going forward to support our sector.

When running we reaches millions of people annually through classroom and other programs in not just Ottawa and Hamilton but across Ontario and Canada and in the United States educating and empowering people to act and make a change.

Little Rays Nature Centers has two locations in Ontario. One in the Ottawa area and the other in Hamilton and both are proudly accredited by Canada's Accredited Zoos and Aquariums, CAZA. For the purposes of disclosure, I also serve on the CAZA board of directors.

As a CAZA accredited institution we are held to the highest standards of animal care, we are peer reviewed every five years and must submit an annual attestation to our compliance. Like my CAZA accredited colleagues across Canada, this means there are no short cuts to the welfare of the animals we care for. The COVID-19 pandemic is no exception.

Animals must be fed, veterinarian care is ongoing, living environments of the animals must be maintained and staff need to be retained to make it all happen. For Little Rays Nature Centers and my colleagues in Ontario this has been an extra difficult time. The animal care requirements make our fixed costs unique.

Unlike many other zoos and nature centers, as an indoor facility that runs indoor events across Ontario our peak season is January through March. This is our summer. In fact, we traditionally generate over 60% of our gross revenue for the year in these 3 months and this is the only period we actually generate profit.

After losing March of 2020, our single busiest month of the year, losing all our festivals from January through March 2021, all of our festivals January through March 2022 and most museums being at limited capacity or closed through this time we have effectively lost our peak season and all of our ability to generate profit for the majority of our last 3 years.

At Little Ray Nature Centers, we are grateful for all the financial support we have received including the \$51,000 from this provincial government as every dollar is helping us survive. But it is important to note that although I believe more support is coming through Minister MacLeod's office in Heritage, Sports, Tourism and Culture that we have received \$51,000 in support from the province, and we have had to borrow \$1,600,000 during this time to simply survive and feed our animals. Countless of which we took in from the Ontario SPCA and the Province of Ontario. Even though we have been the main partner for the province of Ontario for the placement of seized and unwanted animals, the Ontario government has provided us with a mere 3% of the money we have required to simply survive and pay our bills to feed our animals.

This leads me to the other aspect of our business, one that is shared by many of my Ontario CAZA accredited colleagues. That is the public service we provide to the government of Ontario and by extension the people of Ontario.

Animal rescue.

We, and my CAZA accredited colleagues across Ontario, get called by Ontario Animal Welfare Services on a regular basis to rescue animals from situations where private owners are no longer able to properly care for animals and the health and welfare of the animals are at risk. As I speak to you today, we are

on stand-by to rescue as many as 30 animals from a residence outside of the Ottawa area. Such an activity incurs very real costs.

With museums operating at limited capacity and our wildlife festivals cancelled, we still have to maintain our physical infrastructure in order to perform such rescues. After the rescue we have to care for the animals for an often-undetermined amount of time until the best long-term solution can be found.

For some context, Little Ray Nature Centers, as the main partner for placement of reptiles and amphibians for the Province of Ontario and the OSPCA for more than 20 years, has rescued and placed upwards of 5000 animals in Ontario alone.

We are not alone in such activities, my Ontario CAZA accredited colleagues also get this call from animal welfare services. My first ask of this committee is that it recommend to the Minister of Finance that the Office of the Solicitor General be allocated proper funding for this rescue and seizure work to not just handle the initial rescue but the long-term costs associated with the care of these animals until the best long term solution can be found.

I have already outlined the current business climate in this pandemic and the \$1.6 million in loans we have had to incur. At Little Ray's Nature Centers, we are not alone. We are grateful for any support this government has provided, that said we need more to survive especially facing our third year of being shut down in our only positive revenue generating period. Thus far there has not been one program that I have seen released Provincially or Federally that supports the unique needs of seasonal businesses that face the reality of losing all or part of their busy season for the 3rd consecutive year. We need specific working capital grants or flexible no interest loan programs targeted to seasonal business operators that will help us recover. Going forward, seasonal business needs greater government assistance as a bridge to get us from losing three peak seasons to, in our case, January of 2023.

Finally, the third step and one my national association, CAZA, had recommended to the Minister of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries' tourism economic task force in 2021. The Ontario

government needs to invest money in 2022 in promoting tourism within and into the province of Ontario with a message that it is safe to travel. CAZA accredited facilities are leaders in operating and providing a safe and healthy environment for visitors. People need to know it is safe to return to indoor festivals and events, travel, and tourism.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present today. I am happy to take any questions during the question-and-answer session of today.

Thank you.

DRAFT