

Chronological Narrative and Analysis of Accessibility, Digital ID, and Governance Issues at the Columbus Zoo (Updated to include inconsistent enforcement, AZA/governance context, and LinkedIn accountability context)

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1. Context: Who We Are and What Changed

- Long-time Zoo members: I've held Columbus Zoo memberships for 10+ years; my wife has been going for decades. - My son Ian is autistic, sensory-sensitive, and has fused wrists. His disability is "invisible" but very real; a wristband can be overwhelming and triggering. - My mother-in-law has a severe tremor and difficulty using smartphones; my mother has historically lacked consistent smartphone access due to cost.

The Zoo implemented a new digital membership + Gold wristband system backed by Attractions.io / Accesso:

- Gold members must now obtain Tyvek wristbands at Guest Relations, Membership, or ride kiosks to access rides, even when they have a valid Gold membership or digital ID ready to show. - The Zoo justifies this as: * Preventing "Gold membership abuse" (fraud); * Simplifying training; * Supporting environmental sustainability by "going digital."

In practice, this system has:

- Caused repeated meltdowns and anxiety for Ian. - Removed his autonomy and independence inside the park. - Confused and excluded older/disabled caregivers from independently taking the children. - Exposed serious flaws in digital privacy and policy transparency. - Resulted in a cease-and-desist letter instead of accommodation.

All of this collides with the Zoo's public claim:

> "The Columbus Zoo and Aquarium believes EVERY guest deserves an exceptional experience regardless of age and ability."

2. Early Phase: Comment Cards, Membership Office, and a Dead Feedback Loop

During the "soft rollout" of the wristband policy:

- Staff began telling us our physical Gold cards were no longer sufficient to ride. - We repeatedly: * Left comment cards; * Spoke with Membership office staff; * Explained Ian's sensory issues and the meltdowns triggered by surprise enforcement; * Raised our mother-in-law's tremor and difficulties with required digital/app use.

Key points from this phase:

- Membership staff told us it was "impossible" to print new membership cards for lost or new memberships. - We were told that comment cards don't have to be responded to, and we shouldn't expect replies. - Staff explicitly said they had no direct line to leadership to escalate feedback or accommodation concerns.

So, although the Zoo's ADA page invites guests to call and request accommodations, the practical reality was: the people we can reach say they cannot escalate or act in meaningful ways.

3. First Leadership Outreach: "Does Anyone Care?"

After months of being ignored at the counter-level, I emailed members of Zoo leadership, including CEO Tom Schmid.

I asked:

- Who is responsible for how the wristband policy affects special-needs and sensory-sensitive guests? - Why is my autistic son melting down almost every trip over wristbands? - Why must we stand in extra lines for bands we immediately throw away, when the Zoo claims digital ID is about sustainability? - Why have our multiple attempts (via membership, comment cards) gotten us nowhere?

I quoted the Zoo's own accessibility language:

> "EVERY guest deserves an exceptional experience regardless of age and ability."

and asked why that promise does not match our lived experience.

4. Response from Operations (Sam King): Policy Rationale and "Accommodations"

Operations Director Sam King eventually responded via email.

She gave the official rationale for the policy:

- Faster lines: If everyone in line has a ticket or wristband, ride operators check "less credentials" and move guests faster. - Training efficiency: Fewer staff need to be trained on validating Gold memberships. - Family flexibility: Digital cards often live on one guardian's phone; wristbands support kids riding separately. - Fraud reduction: They hope to cut down on "Gold card misuse" with fewer pinch points and better training.

For guests like Ian, she described "accommodations":

- If a wristband cannot be worn on the wrist, they can accept it on an ankle, a shoe, or a second band on the guardian's wrist.

She said this was piloted the previous year, and they would update the accessibility guide and log our feedback. On its face, the message is: "We've thought this through, and we're accommodating."

5. Detailed Rebuttal: Fraud, Ableism, Tyvek, Autism, and Inconsistency

I replied in detail, addressing each justification and adding on-the-ground reality.

5.1 Fraud & "Training" vs Reality

- Ride operators frequently don't actually check bands, tickets, or phones with any rigor. - Tyvek wristbands are easy to counterfeit; staff are not trained or empowered to detect fakes. - From my professional background in security (e.g., work for Chuck E. Cheese Entertainment), the real fraud vector is: * Printed barcodes that are never scanned or validated, and can be resold or photocopied.

I later demonstrated this with proof-of-concept code showing how easily printed tickets (now without the Zoo logo) could be cloned and reused, while staff often simply collect or trash them without scanning.

Inconsistency on the ground:

- We observed other guests, including kids, being allowed on rides with no wristband visible at all, simply by showing a phone and saying "we're Gold members." One staffer even said "not that I don't believe you, but let me see" and then let them through after viewing the screen. - At the same time, we were forced to: * Stand in line for wristbands; * Wear multiple bands on my body; * Listen to staff tell us "technically we can't let him on like that" when bands were on my arm or shoe instead of Ian's wrist.

So whatever the official training is, enforcement is uneven: other families get leniency; my autistic son gets the full weight of policy.

5.2 Environmental Claims vs Tyvek Reality

- The Zoo markets going digital as reducing plastic and paper use, but: * Our Gold membership now generates hundreds of Tyvek bands per year. * Tyvek is difficult to recycle and often becomes litter. - We were never clearly told how to properly dispose of Tyvek; there are no dedicated Tyvek bins or consistent instructions accompanying the bands.

Sustainability is used as a talking point while the actual practice is the opposite: more waste, not less.

5.3 Digital Ableism and Older Caregivers

- The policy assumes competent smartphone use for every guest and caregiver. - My mother-in-law's tremor makes smartphone use extremely difficult; my mother has historically lacked a smartphone at times due to cost. - For them, being forced into a digital membership and app is not an upgrade-it is an accessibility barrier.

The Zoo did not grapple with this: the design of their system is centered around the "average" tech-competent user, not the disabled or low-income guest.

5.4 Autism, Consistency, and Humiliation

- Autism requires consistency and predictability; varying which kiosk/office is open, and when, triggers anxiety and meltdowns. - Each trip becomes a humiliation ritual: * We must once again ask for an exception, in public. * Ian must either be forced into the band or forced into a conversation about his disability with strangers. - This is not what "accommodation" looks like; this is repeatedly making an autistic child prove his right to exist comfortably in the space.

5.5 Feedback and Gaslighting

- Staff had already agreed privately that the policy was confusing and unhelpful, but said their feedback never goes anywhere. - Hearing leadership continue to center "training" and "Gold card abuse" felt like gaslighting, because it ignores: * The actual behavior of staff in the field; * The real, measurable harm to disabled guests; * The inconsistency in enforcement, where some non-disabled guests get exceptions without trouble.

6. Second Response from Sam and Escalation to Anthony Sabo: "We're Done Talking"

Sam wrote again, apologizing for frustration but doubling down:

- The accommodations she listed are what they can offer now. - Full implementation is new; they will keep evaluating. - They will train staff and add info to the accessibility guide. - She copied Anthony Sabo, VP of Zoombezi Bay and Guest Services.

Anthony's email:

- Acknowledged environmental discussion and mentioned exploring alternative materials and Tyvek recycling (while noting they have existing stock to use). - Referenced security footage: I obtained a Gold wristband at the carousel kiosk, removed it shortly thereafter, and told staff I would continue to voice my concerns. - Reiterated the policy: apply wristbands to wrists unless a specific accommodation is requested; they can accept bands on shoes/ankles/guardians.

Then critically, he wrote:

- To "level-set expectations," I must inform staff of our specific accommodation needs at each interaction. - The Zoo believes it has provided reasonable accommodation for the wristband policy. - They will not respond further on these matters.

In short: "We're right, we've done enough, and this conversation is over."

7. Why Their Claimed "Reasonable Accommodation" Fails for Ian

The offered accommodation does not meet Ian's needs:

- It removes his autonomy: if the band must be on my body or a disabled grandmother's, he cannot move beyond our reach without fear of being denied access.
- It forces ongoing disclosure: he is expected to identify himself as disabled, or have us do it for him, at each kiosk. That is humiliating and anxiety-inducing for a child.
- Staff don't consistently follow the supposed accommodation: * We've been told "technically we can't let him on like that" when bands were on my arm or foot instead of his wrist.

Meanwhile, we have literal, current examples of other kids getting on rides without bands while my autistic son must endure extra lines, extra scrutiny, and extra emotional labor. That discrepancy in enforcement-one rule for the average guest, a much harsher one for the disabled child-cuts directly against the Zoo's own stated values.

8. The August 13 All-Shift Memo and Signs: Proof That Clear Communication Works

Eventually, after repeated friction, the Zoo issued an August 13 all-shift memo and/or posted signs clarifying that:

- Bands can be worn on a guardian's foot or other locations besides the wrist.

This is important because it proves:

- They can change staff behavior and reduce discrimination with simple, clear signage and instructions.
- They only issued these clarifications after multiple incidents of staff harassing us and refusing to honor alternatives.

Yet despite seeing that a simple memo and sign can fix confusion, they still refuse the simplest, most effective accommodation of all: a band-free path for autistic guests. Instead, they escalated to legal threats.

9. Digital ID Vulnerability, Children's Data, and COPPA Concerns

In parallel, I discovered a serious flaw in the Zoo's digital membership implementation using Attractions.io / Accesso.

- The app allowed users to add a membership to their digital wallet by scanning/emulating a Code128 barcode, with no login or email verification.
- Once scanned, it revealed first name, last name, and photo, including children under 13.
- Membership ID patterns made it possible to generate valid barcodes programmatically.

I tested barcodes derived from six memberships we had paid for and confirmed that:

- I could view data (name and photo) for a child in the Tullis family, whose membership I did not personally purchase and for whom I had no parental authorization.

I did not brute-force the entire database, to avoid committing a crime. Instead, I:

- Reported it to Zoo staff (info@, Sam, Anthony),
- Reported it to Attractions.io CEO Mark Locker,
- Filed complaints with: * Ohio Attorney General, * FTC, * Local FBI field office, * UK ICO (GDPR).

Attractions.io:

- Confirmed the issue.
- Implemented fixes on March 12-13, 2025 (disabling unauthenticated imports and adding a last-name requirement).

Later, Zoo legal counsel Teresa McIntyre sent me a letter stating the Zoo was COPPA-compliant, without

acknowledging that prior to my report and the fixes, the design allowed unauthorized access to children's data.

Additionally:

- When a reporter asked the Zoo about this, communications VP Nicole Gomez Racey told them: * The system protects member privacy. * The developer fixed an issue but an audit found no unauthorized attempts or brute-force. * The chance of randomly guessing a valid barcode is 1 in 6 billion. * I only accessed information tied to memberships I personally purchased.

This is inaccurate and minimizing because:

- I accessed data for a child in another family (the Tullis family), whose membership I did not purchase.
- My access was, by any plain-language definition, unauthorized, even if I exercised restraint.
- The 1-in-6-billion framing ignores predictable patterns and scripted attacks.
- They told the press about the audit but never shared detailed findings with me, the original reporter of the issue.

Once again, the Zoo's external messaging emphasizes security and "facts," while internally minimizing and sidestepping my actual technical findings.

10. Public Records Requests: "Specific and Thoughtful" in Theory, Stonewalled in Practice

CEO Tom Schmid has told media that the Zoo will stop hiding behind "private" status and respond to specific and thoughtful records requests.

I filed detailed requests, such as:

- Gold membership abuse: * How much money was allegedly lost due to "abuse"; * How much was spent on Tyvek bands as a response; * How much was paid for Attractions.io / the digital ID system; * Any evidence that "abuse" decreased after these changes.

- Printed ticket fraud: * Metrics on improper use of paper tickets that are not scanned or date-coded.

- ADA accommodations: * Number of requests received via the ADA phone line and other channels; * Number approved vs denied; * Criteria for determining when "we won't change policy to accommodate one guest"; * Any record of accommodations granted or refused in cases like ours.

- "Exceptional experience" definition: * Any internal documentation defining what "exceptional experience" means for disabled guests, given the public claim that EVERY guest deserves an exceptional experience regardless of age and ability.

- COPPA/audit documentation: * Records of the audit they told media had cleared them.

None of these requests were substantively answered. Instead, my persistence in making them was later folded into a narrative about me "harassing" the Zoo.

11. Outreach to Board and Leadership; Blocking and Annoyance

Recognizing that operations and guest services weren't solving the issue, I escalated to governance:

- I emailed every person listed on the Zoo's leadership and board pages.
- I contacted board liaison Suzy and explicitly asked her to ensure board members saw my concerns about: * Repeated discrimination against Ian; * The digital privacy flaw; * The failure of the ADA/accommodation process.

What happened:

- No board member meaningfully engaged with me.
- The board liaison seemed annoyed by my attempts to reach the board, despite that being her role.
- CEO Tom Schmid, who markets himself publicly as "Mr. Fix-

It" and a culture reformer, blocked me on LinkedIn after I tried to get his attention. - PR leadership refused to meaningfully engage with me while crafting technical and legal spin for reporters.

The overall impression is a governance structure that welcomes flattering press but resents direct accountability from an affected member.

12. Public Advocacy, LinkedIn Context, and Technical Proof-of-Concepts

With internal channels failing, I moved into public advocacy:

- Created columbuszoosucks.org to document the history and keep a record. - Posted on Twitter/X and elsewhere about: * Ableism in wristband and digital policies; * Environmental waste of Tyvek; * Ticket fraud and poor training; * The COPPA-adjacent vulnerability and lack of transparent response.

I also posted on LinkedIn, but not in a vacuum and not randomly spamming staff:

- My LinkedIn comments were almost always in direct response to posts by Zoo executives, staff, partners, or industry peers that were publicly praising: * How "empowering" the guest experience is, * How "amazing" the leadership and culture are, * How the Zoo is "fixing" past problems and centering guests, * Or how strong and values-driven various partnerships are. - On those posts, I shared our family's experience of: * A disabled child who feels humiliated and unwelcome, * A leadership structure that will not meaningfully engage with our concerns, * A records and incident-response posture that looks more defensive than transparent.

In other words, these LinkedIn posts were context-appropriate, critical replies to public self-praise and marketing-exactly the kind of accountability commentary the platform is meant to support. They were not direct messages, doxxing, or threats; they were public replies that said, in essence, "This rosy description does not match how your policies are affecting my autistic son and our family."

Framing that as "harassment" erases the difference between:

- Targeted personal attacks, and - A disabled family pushing back on brand-building narratives that ignore their lived experience.

I also provided proof-of-concept code showing how easily printed ride tickets could be cloned and reused when staff don't scan them, including commentary on how this enables staff-level reselling schemes.

Important clarifications:

- I did not share private, non-public personal contact info; the cell numbers I used were already shared by the Zoo or in PR contexts. - The photo they characterize as "a minor staff member" is only a picture of someone's legs throwing a ticket in the trash, not an identifiable portrait. - To my knowledge, no social media platform has flagged or removed my posts as threatening or abusive. - I am blunt and sarcastic, but focused on policy, operations, discrimination, and technical failings-not physical threats.

Despite this, the Zoo later recasts this advocacy as part of a "pattern of harassment."

13. Cease-and-Desist Letter: "Baseless," "No Legitimate Purpose," and Ohio Law

Eventually, rather than adjust policy or re-open dialogue, the Zoo hires outside counsel (Porter Wright). Their letter:

- Calls my concerns "baseless". - Suggests my communications serve no legitimate purpose. - Hints that my continued contact with staff and leadership could violate Ohio law if anyone feels threatened. - Orders me to cease contacting their law firm. - Misstates facts about: * My alleged use of a "personal" cell number that was actually public contact info; * The nature of the staff photo I posted.

The letter also has a distinct tone of minimization, including implying they "doubt" my descriptions of discrimination and lack of accommodation.

As a Black man advocating for his autistic son, reading a letter that jumps straight from "we doubt your concerns" to "Ohio law" and "threatened staff" looks like an attempt to:

- Reframe disability advocacy and accountability as criminal harassment. - Intimidate me into silence, rather than fixing the underlying issues.

14. My Response to the Lawyer: Autistic Communication, Clarifications, and Offers

I responded to their counsel thoroughly:

- Explained that I likely am autistic myself; I have a long history of being called verbose, hyper-focused, and of missing social cues-but not of being factually inconsistent. - Stated that every email and contact was made to facilitate our visits and secure a workable accommodation for my son and our family. - Rejected the term "erratic" as stigmatizing and untrue. - Corrected inaccuracies: * The nature of the staff photo; * The public origin of phone numbers used in communication; * The characterization of my concerns as unrelated or baseless.

I also reiterated:

- My standing offer to correct any factual errors on my website or posts if they can identify them. - My view that labeling me "erratic" and "harassing" while ignoring the substance of my ADA complaints is part of a broader pattern of minimizing neurodivergent communication and disregarding disability advocacy.

Instead of accepting this as an opening to problem-solve, the Zoo left the threat standing and continued to characterize my advocacy as something to be managed by lawyers, not leadership.

15. Ongoing Harm and Emotional Impact

This activity is not in the abstract; it continues to impact my family now:

- Ian: * Has said from the Zoo, "I don't know if I ever wanna come here again... you know, those stupid W's." * Speaks days or weeks in advance of visits about how he expects staff to harass him about wristbands. * Now associates some rides and parts of the park with humiliation, anxiety, and meltdown risk. - My mother-in-law and mother: * Are effectively unable to take the kids independently due to digital requirements and wristband enforcement. - Our visits: * Sometimes end with the family splitting up-my daughter rides something while I walk away with Ian, who can't tolerate the band or the sight of it on me. - Staff behavior remains inconsistent: * Some staff still question or refuse our accommodations. * Some staff are reportedly warned about the Finisterre family, rather than being instructed how to support us.

All of this is the opposite of an "exceptional experience regardless of age and ability."

16. The Core Discrepancy: Public Promise vs Private Practice

Public messaging:

- "EVERY guest deserves an exceptional experience regardless of age and ability." - "Guest service is our #1 priority" (G.R.E.A.T. mantra). - "We're committed to transparency and will respond to specific, thoughtful requests." - "We take privacy seriously; there has never been a breach; we respond with facts." - "We're correcting a heavy-handed, fear-based culture."

Private practice in our case:

- Refusal to provide the one accommodation (band-free Gold access) that would truly work for an autistic child, even after countless explanations and clear evidence of harm. - A requirement that Ian repeatedly

disclose and defend his disability in public, converting the ADA process into a source of shame. - Staff who admit they cannot escalate feedback; comment cards that go nowhere. - A serious digital vulnerability affecting children's data, patched without direct parental notice, then downplayed to media. - Detailed, specific records requests met with silence or folded into a narrative about me being harassing. - A communications and governance structure that: * Ignores direct outreach from a disabled family; * Blocks me on LinkedIn; * Has a board liaison who acts annoyed I even contacted her; * Sends a heavy-handed cease-and-desist framing ADA advocacy as a threat.

Meanwhile, we have multiple concrete examples of other kids getting on rides without bands while my autistic son must endure extra lines, extra scrutiny, and extra emotional labor. That discrepancy in enforcement-one rule for the average guest, a much harsher one for the disabled child-cuts directly against the Zoo's own stated values.

17. What I Am Asking For

I'm not trying to destroy the Columbus Zoo. I'm asking for:

- Real ADA accommodation for Ian and similarly situated guests: * A band-free option using Gold cards or digital IDs, properly flagged and honored at rides.
- Dignity-driven communication and training: * Signs and scripts that offer alternatives up front ("If you or someone in your party can't wear a band due to disability or sensory issues, here are your options...").
- Honesty about fraud and sustainability: * Acknowledgment that "Gold card abuse" and "training issues" were overstated; * Recognition that Tyvek wristbands neither meaningfully stop fraud nor align with conservation goals when not transparently handled.
- Transparency and good-faith engagement: * Genuine responses to records requests about fraud metrics, accommodation statistics, digital costs, and the audit; * An end to spinning technical and legal details in media while stonewalling the person who reported them.
- An end to legal intimidation as the primary response: * Stop treating my attempts to hold you to your own words as "baseless harassment" under Ohio law; * Treat them as what they are: a father trying-persistently, sometimes bluntly-to get his autistic son the accessible experience the Zoo publicly promises to every guest.

If the Zoo truly believes its own statement that EVERY guest deserves an exceptional experience regardless of age and ability, a natural starting point would be to fix the experience of the one autistic kid who has been telling them, clearly and consistently, exactly how their policy is hurting him and what would make it better.

18. Tom Schmid's AZA Insider Role and the Trust/Reputation Gap

Another layer of context that matters here is who Tom Schmid is in the broader zoo world.

- He is not just any CEO; he is a long-time AZA (Association of Zoos & Aquariums) insider: * He has served on the AZA board. * From around 2012-2013, he served as chair of the AZA board. * He has been recognized as an AZA inspector of the year. * He sits on multiple boards and committees tied to accreditation and standards (including WAZA and the Coastal America Learning Center Network).

This means:

- Tom has spent years on the "regulator/standard-setter" side of the fence, helping define and enforce what "good practice" and "accreditable behavior" looks like for zoos.
- When he came to Columbus, he was widely presented as the person who would restore trust and fix culture after the prior financial and governance scandal.
- Media coverage has repeatedly positioned him as "Mr. Fix-It," the leader tasked with turning things around and making the Zoo transparent, accountable, and guest-focused again.

In that light, several things about this situation land differently:

1. He knows what accreditation bodies expect in terms of: - Guest experience, - ADA and disability accommodation, - Governance and transparency, - Handling of data privacy and incident response.

This is literally his lane. "I didn't know better" isn't credible here.

2. He has publicly framed himself as focused on trust and reputation: - Writing opinion pieces and guest columns about how the Zoo is recovering, fixing past mistakes, and embracing transparency. - Talking about leaving behind a prior "heavy-handed culture of fear" and replacing it with better governance and openness.
3. He has insider relationships with the same organizations whose approval and image the Columbus Zoo relies on: - He knows how the AZA thinks, what it looks for, and what narratives matter for accreditation and public confidence. - Yet the Columbus Zoo lost AZA accreditation before his tenure and is still in the process of trying to rebuild its reputation.

Against that backdrop, what happened with our family looks less like a series of unfortunate oversights and more like a deliberate pattern of image management over lived experience:

- When a dad of an autistic kid raises serious, well-documented accessibility concerns: * The response is not "let's fix this" but "we doubt" it's really happening and "we've already done enough." * Instead of building a solution around a real disabled child, they weaponize policy and legal language about "Ohio law" and "harassment."

- When that same dad responsibly discloses a vulnerability that could expose children's data: * The fixes are made quietly. * The public story is minimized and spun ("no breach," "1 in 6 billion," "only his own family"). * The Zoo tells a more flattering version of events to reporters than it ever does to the person who raised the alarm.

- When that dad makes "specific and thoughtful" records requests that go straight to the heart of policy choices (fraud metrics, Tyvek costs, ADA accommodation data): * The requests go unanswered. * His persistence is reframed as a "pattern" of bothering staff and leadership.

And personally:

- Instead of engaging directly with a persistent but fact-driven critic, Tom: * Blocks me on LinkedIn after I try to bring these issues to his attention. * Continues to present himself publicly as the guy who welcomes hard questions and is cleaning up institutional culture.

The AZA insider piece matters because it underscores that this is not a leadership team that accidentally stumbled into mishandling an ADA complaint. It is a leadership team headed by someone who:

- Understands accreditation, - Understands how disability, guest experience, and transparency are supposed to work, - Has built a personal brand on "fixing" broken organizational cultures,

and yet, in this case, chose to let his institution respond to a disabled child's family with:

- Minimal practical change, - Legal threats, - Public spin for reporters, - and silence toward the person most affected.

That is the core trust gap: a self-styled reformer, steeped in accreditation culture and "best practices," presiding over a response that treats disability advocacy as a PR and legal risk to be contained rather than as a problem to be solved. In a zoo world that claims to care about inclusion and education, that disconnect is hard to reconcile.