

It's official, panda bears are coming to the Toronto Zoo

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It's official - the Toronto Zoo is getting a pair of adorable panda bears from China.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, on a trade trip to China this week, made the announcement early Thursday, Feb. 9, morning that the agreement had been signed between Canada and China.

While it wasn't much of a secret, with the news now official people are free to celebrate publicly.

Scarborough East Councillor Paul Ainslie, a zoo board member, heard the news Thursday morning.

"I was eating my breakfast and I heard the news. I yelled so loudly my wife came running downstairs because she thought I'd hurt myself," said the excited councillor.

"I'm glad that they were able to get that on the agenda. We had some very positive vibes from the Chinese government in the last couple of months."

Few details have been released, but it is known a pair of giant pandas will be sent to Canada for 10 years of collaborative research. The animals' time in Canada will be split between the Toronto Zoo and the Calgary Zoo.

It is expected the deal will cost about \$1 million a year.

Ainslie said there is a lot of work for the zoo to do before the animals can arrive including design and construction of an enclosure, and finding private sponsors to foot some or all of the price tag for the prized exhibit.

"I expect we'll see a lot of private companies who will want to be involved," Ainslie said.

Toronto hasn't seen pandas since 1985, which is the last time the zoo had the popular animal on loan from China. Ainslie said he remembers that being a very popular time at the zoo.

Pandas are always a big draw because of their cuddly and docile nature and because there are quite visible in their habitat. They are expected to a big boost for the zoo that saw visitor numbers drop last year and is dealing with budget constraints.

The zoo hasn't decided yet whether a new enclosure will be built for the special pair or if an existing exhibit will be altered for the guests, but Ainslie said after the zoo board meeting last week there was plenty of space on site to accommodate the enclosure.

No one from the Toronto Zoo would comment on the announcement.

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