



**MOUNT LAUREL TOWNSHIP**  
MUNICIPAL CENTER  
100 MOUNT LAUREL ROAD  
MOUNT LAUREL, NEW JERSEY 08054

### **CONTRACT BREACH LEADS TO CLOSURE OF MOUNT LAUREL'S PAWS FARM**

Mount Laurel Township Officials are left scrambling after the Discovery Museum shockingly notified the Township that it would breach its three year contractual commitment to operate the PAWS Farm Nature Center on Hainesport-Mount Laurel Road just six months into its second three year term.

Simply unwilling to fulfill its contractual obligations, the Discovery Museum leadership closed the doors to the public on January 6<sup>th</sup> leaving the Township residents with a note on the door that the animals were hibernating. It then terminated most of the staff. The Township convinced Discovery Museum to leave a crew to care for the approximately 180 animals on site. Discovery provided the crew for only 60 days which expires at the end of February. The facility is regulated by the New Jersey Department of Agriculture with additional permitting through New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife.

"What is most disheartening is Discovery's unplanned decision to abruptly close the doors. With no notice the Township has been left to struggle to save our local treasure. If they gave us time, we could probably find a new partner willing to operate the facility but, sadly, they have backed the Township into a corner and left little hope that we can keep the doors open. The Township itself simply can't commit hundreds of thousands of tax dollars to maintain the facility, employ staff and feed and care for the animals," said Mayor Irwin Edelson. "It's disgraceful the position they left us in."

The Township has been aggressively seeking a new partner to operate the facility but to date no other organization has stepped forward to lead the nature center into the future. In a last ditch effort, the Township set a February 20, 2020 proposal deadline for potential operators to present a plan to operate the facility for the next five years. Unfortunately, no qualified vendor committed to a long term plan for operation of PAWS.

Care of the animals remains the top priority. Thirty Four of the animals are Township-owned. The Township simultaneously solicited other nature centers, zoos, corporate or private entities to re-house the Township's animals. The Township found appropriate homes for most of the animals at zoos and other nature centers and sanctuaries. Discovery Museum would be responsible to caring for and rehousing its approximately 150 animals. The Township will keep a watchful eye on Discovery Museum to ensure that it appropriately and safely rehouses the animals if the Township cannot find a new provider by the end of the month.

"Discovery Museum's actions are outrageous. The Township has bent over backwards to help the facility including repaving and expanding the parking lot just last year after the new three year deal was signed," explained Township Manager Meredith Tomczyk, "Had they given any indication that they were having second thoughts, the Township could have spent those tax dollars in other areas and, equally important, had adequate time to find a new operator to continue the PAWS Farm mission."