



*como friends*  
THRIVE ON

# Como Friends President



## COMPENSATION

Salary Range: \$195,000 - \$225,000

**Applications will be accepted until May 9, 2025.**  
To apply, send your resume and cover letter to  
[apply@ballingerleafblad.com](mailto:apply@ballingerleafblad.com), attention Jamie Millard.

PRESENTED BY:

ballinger | leafblad

# Como Friends President

Ballinger | Leafblad is proud to partner with [Como Friends](#) in the search for its next President—a rare opportunity to lead the nonprofit partner of the beloved Como Park Zoo & Conservatory, visited by nearly 1.8 million people each year. As the philanthropic engine behind transformational capital projects, conservation efforts, and barrier-free access, Como Friends plays a vital role in shaping this treasured public space. The next President will build on a strong foundation of support, bringing visionary leadership, fundraising expertise, and a commitment to the public-private partnership that makes Como thrive—honoring its legacy while leading it into a vibrant and inclusive future.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Overview.....	3
At-A-Glance.....	4
Key Programs.....	5
Position Summary.....	9
Desired Qualifications.....	9
Key Responsibilities.....	10
Compensation & Benefits.....	12
Working Conditions.....	12
Meet The Search Committee.....	13
To Apply.....	14

# OVERVIEW

Como Friends serves as the philanthropic heart of Como Park Zoo & Conservatory, one of Minnesota's most cherished cultural landmarks.

Founded in 2000, Como Friends was created by visionary community volunteers who recognized the need to protect and enhance this beloved institution for future generations. Since then, Como Friends has grown into a powerful public-private partnership that fuels innovation, conservation, and barrier-free access for nearly two million visitors each year.

With a mission to inspire community generosity in support of Como Park Zoo & Conservatory, Como Friends has raised and contributed more than \$50 million to advance animal care, horticulture, education, and capital improvements. In 2024 alone, the organization invested over \$2.2 million to support everything from zookeeper and gardener positions to capital improvements like the ADA-compliant campus upgrades and new veterinary equipment. This strategic funding strengthens Como's role as a conservation classroom and a vibrant hub for community connection, with more than 850,000 school-aged children benefiting from its educational programs.

Operating with a lean staff but outsized impact, Como Friends leverages individual donations, retail revenue, and corporate and foundation support to amplify the value of public investment.

Its work ensures that Como remains one of the few zoos and botanical gardens in the country with free admission for all—a commitment to equity and access that reflects its core values. By embracing innovation, championing conservation, and advancing equity, Como Friends continues to shape a future where all Minnesotans can explore and enjoy the wonders of the natural world.

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when nature is free  
to all, every child,  
family, and visitor  
has the chance to  
wonder, learn, and  
belong.

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# AT-A-GLANCE

## About the Team

- 12 full-time staff
- 43 gift shop sales staff
- 22 board members

Annual Operating Budget  
**\$4.1 MILLION**

**\$2.2M+**

in private contributions  
contributed to Como Park  
Zoo & Conservatory in 2024

**1,200+**

animals of all shapes, sizes and  
species live at Como

## Mission

Como Friends is a  
nonprofit 501(c)3  
organization whose  
mission is to inspire  
community generosity in  
support of Como Park  
Zoo and Conservatory  
so it thrives for  
generations to come.

**\$50M+**

in new investment at Como since  
Como Friends' founding in 2000

**1,205**

attendees participate in Como  
Friends' events each year

## VISION AND VALUES

### A POWERFUL PARTNERSHIP

Como Friends envisions a future in which Como Park Zoo & Conservatory is a global leader in conservation, animal care and horticulture with barrier-free access for all.

### CHAMPION CONSERVATION

By inspiring community support for Como Park Zoo & Conservatory, Como Friends ensures the next generation learns to care for the wonders of nature.

### ADVANCE EQUITY

To make sure every visitor is valued at Como, Como Friends embraces and serves the diverse community by protecting free access for all.

### EMBRACE INNOVATION

From naturalistic new habitats to cutting-edge animal and plant care, support for Como Friends helps Como Park Zoo & Conservatory grow and thrive.



# KEY PROGRAMS

Como Friends' events and programs are designed to bring people together in support of Como Park Zoo & Conservatory. Through engaging experiences that inspire generosity and deepen understanding, these gatherings and publications build community and connect visitors to Como's mission.

## Individual, Corporate, and Foundation Giving

Individual, corporate, and foundation giving continues to be the heartbeat of Como Friends, fueling transformational projects and everyday excellence at Como Park Zoo & Conservatory.

## Planned Giving

Como Friends planned giving program provides donors the opportunity to boost their impact at Como by making a legacy gift that will continue their support for animals and plants into the future.

## Fundraising Events

Fundraising events remain joyful and impactful gatherings that bring the community together to celebrate and support Como. These events include Como Friends' signature events—Sunset Affair, Bouquets, Como After Hours, and Como Quest.

## Membership & Sponsorship Programs

Membership and sponsorship programs serve as meaningful entry points for individuals and organizations to connect with Como Friends. While costs associated with these programs are expected to rise, their true value lies in building lasting relationships and fostering deeper engagement that often grows into broader, long-term support.

## Communications

Como Friends multi-channel communications strategy engages existing supporters and community members in learning more about Como Park Zoo & Conservatory and details how their gifts support animals, plants, conservation and free admission. All communications channels pair beautiful photographs with in-depth stories to engage people in the wonders of the natural world.

## Retail Revenue – Garden Safari Gifts

At Garden Safari Gifts, every purchase is a gift that gives back. Operated by Como Friends, this beloved retail operation spans four locations across the Como campus. These proceeds directly support Como's mission, helping fund improvements and programs that enhance the experience for nearly two million visitors each year.



## SUNSET AFFAIR

Como Friends' premier fundraising gala and a one-of-a-kind summer celebration in support of Como Park Zoo & Conservatory.

Set against the breathtaking backdrop of the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory, [this elegant evening](#) brings together community leaders, longtime supporters, and new friends for an unforgettable night of purpose and joy. Guests enjoy delicious food and drinks, exciting auctions, live entertainment, and exclusive access to Como's extraordinary gardens and animal habitats.

As Como Friends' most significant fundraising event of the year, Sunset Affair plays a vital role in sustaining Como's mission of conservation, education, and barrier-free access for all. Every dollar raised helps preserve the beauty and accessibility of one of Minnesota's most treasured cultural and environmental landmarks—ensuring Como remains free and welcoming to nearly two million visitors each year.



## GARDEN SAFARI GIFTS

At Como Friends' Garden Safari Gifts, every purchase made helps support the plants and animals at Como Park Zoo & Conservatory.

Garden Safari Gifts, the retail operation at Como Park Zoo & Conservatory, is managed by Como Friends and includes the main gift shop in the Visitor Center along with seasonal locations across the grounds. More than just a place to find thoughtful, nature-inspired gifts, Garden Safari Gifts is a mission-driven enterprise—every purchase directly supports Como Friends' efforts to fund improvements, programs, and access at Como. The net revenue generated by the shop plays an important role in sustaining Como's operations and enhancing the visitor experience year-round.



## OTHER PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Creativity and engagement are deeply woven into Como Friends' programs, sparking connection and building enduring affinity for this Minnesota cultural treasure through innovative education, immersive experiences, and inclusive access for all.

### COMO FRIENDS INSIDER

is Como Friends' [quarterly newsletter](#) designed to keep supporters informed and inspired. Delivered four times a year, this publication offers behind-the-scenes stories, program highlights, conservation updates, and upcoming event details—bringing readers closer to the animals, plants, and people that make Como Park Zoo & Conservatory thrive. With beautiful photography and engaging storytelling, Insider is a trusted source for staying connected to Como's mission and impact.

### BOUQUETS

Bouquets is Como Friends' signature [winter fundraiser](#), bringing together community supporters or an unforgettable evening of fine wine, craft beer and gourmet bites – all set amid the stunning gardens of the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory. All proceeds support the plants, animals and free admission at Como Park Zoo & Conservatory.

### COMO QUEST

is a [family-friendly adventure](#) that turns Como Park Zoo & Conservatory into a dynamic puzzle to solve. Teams of all ages explore the campus on a mission to uncover clues, complete challenges, and win prizes—all while supporting Como Friends. With interactive fun around every corner, Como Quest is a spirited way to experience the wonders of Como together.

### COMO AFTER HOURS

Como After Hours invites guests to experience the magic of Como Park Zoo & Conservatory after dark. [This adults-only evening](#) features after-hours access to the Conservatory and select zoo exhibits. With seasonal cocktails, local eats, and immersive experiences, Como After Hours offers a fun and fresh way to support Como Friends and celebrate this one-of-a-kind community treasure.





# PRESIDENT

## SUMMARY

The President of Como Friends is a visionary and strategic leader who will guide the next chapter of this trusted nonprofit partner to Como Park Zoo and Conservatory. This role leads a talented team, works closely with the Board of Directors, and partners with the City of Saint Paul to inspire community generosity that keeps Como free and accessible to all. The President is responsible for shaping strategy, strengthening donor relationships, overseeing financial and operational health, and championing Como Friends' mission across fundraising, advocacy, and community engagement.

The ideal candidate is creative, collaborative, and passionate about Como. They bring strong experience in fundraising, leadership, and partnership-building, along with a knack for seeing new possibilities and helping others bring bold ideas to life. With a deep appreciation for Como's impact, they'll listen to community feedback, support staff creativity, and help Como Friends grow its reach and relevance for the future.

Annual Operating Budget  
**\$4.1 MILLION**

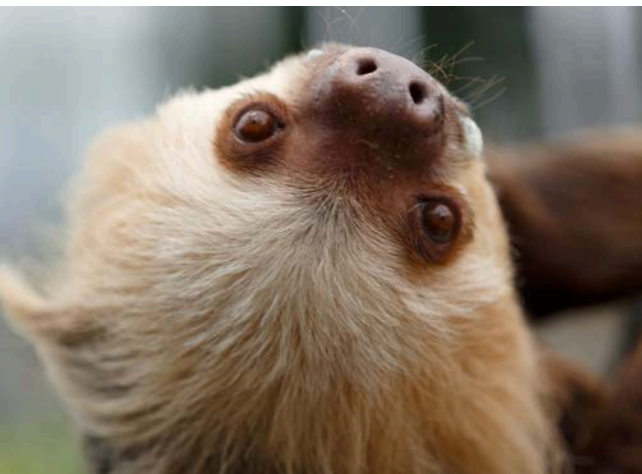
## MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES

The President reports to the Board of Directors.

Direct reports include: Director of Individual Giving; Director of Finance; Director of Institutional Partnership & Events; Creative Director; Administrative Assistant; and Director of Retail Operations.

## DESIRED QUALIFICATIONS

- 10+ years of leadership and management experience, ideally in the nonprofit or civic sector.
- Proven success in fundraising, with a strong track record cultivating major donors, securing institutional support, and leading multi-channel campaigns.
- Experience partnering with a Board of Directors, with the ability to support effective governance, strategic engagement, and committee structures.
- Demonstrated operational acumen, including oversight of budgeting, financial reporting, endowment strategy, and administrative systems.
- Experience managing personnel issues in collaboration with an HR consultant, including navigating staffing challenges common in a part-time, retail workforce.
- Legislative or public advocacy experience, including the ability to build relationships with policymakers and advance public funding efforts such as capital bonding requests.
- Exceptional written and verbal communication skills, with the ability to serve as a compelling ambassador for the organization.
- Strong interpersonal and relationship-building skills, with a collaborative and humble leadership style that fosters trust, inclusivity, and long-term partnerships.



**DESIRED QUALIFICATIONS (cont.)**

- Creative and forward-thinking, with the ability to generate new ideas, see emerging opportunities, and evolve programming and strategies to deepen impact.
- Experience navigating public-private partnerships and/or working with government or civic partners is highly valued.
- Ability to manage multiple priorities in a fast-paced environment, with strong initiative, adaptability, and a commitment to mission-centered innovation.
- Deep appreciation for the unique role Como Park Zoo & Conservatory plays in Minnesota's cultural landscape and a passion for equity, conservation, and community access.

# KEY RESPONSIBILITIES

**BOARD ENGAGEMENT & STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP**

- Partner with the Board of Directors to articulate a long-term strategic vision for Como Friends, ensuring alignment with mission, values, and priorities.
- Lead board engagement by cultivating meaningful relationships, facilitating strategic discussions, and ensuring effective governance through well-staffed committees and high-impact meetings.

**FUNDRAISING & PHILANTHROPY STRATEGY**

- Serve as the chief ambassador and strategist for Como Friends' philanthropic mission, fostering a culture of generosity that sustains Como's barrier-free access and conservation leadership.
- Cultivate, steward, and grow major donor relationships, including legacy donors and new supporters, and provide strategic oversight to annual and campaign fundraising activities, including Give to the Max Day and capital campaigns.

**PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP & ADVOCACY**

- Represent Como Friends in strong partnership with the City of Saint Paul and Como Park Zoo & Conservatory leadership, collaborating on shared priorities and campus-wide initiatives.
- Oversee Como Friends' advocacy strategy, hiring and managing government relations consultants, coordinating with city leaders, and building trusted relationships with policymakers to advance capital bonding requests and long-term campus investment.

**FINANCIAL & OPERATIONAL STEWARDSHIP**

- Lead Como Friends' financial strategy, working with staff and board to manage a multi-million-dollar annual budget, oversee investment and endowment management, and ensure transparency, sustainability, and impact.
- Provide organizational leadership that ensures operational excellence, strategic resource allocation, and alignment between people, process, and purpose.

## STAFF LEADERSHIP & ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

- Inspire, manage, and develop a collaborative, high-performing team aligned around mission, equity, and innovation.
- Directly supervise senior leaders and foster a strong, inclusive culture across all levels of the organization.
- Provide leadership and hands-on support in personnel matters, particularly within the Garden Safari Gifts retail team, which includes more than 40 part-time staff spanning generations. Serve as a key liaison with Como Friends' HR consultant to navigate sensitive staffing issues, conflict resolution, and performance management with empathy and professionalism.

## GRANTMAKING & IMPACT INVESTMENTS

- Steward and deploy Como Friends' internal grants to Como Park Zoo & Conservatory, including discretionary grants and asset preservation grants, including discretionary and asset preservation funds, in partnership with the Zoo and Conservatory to support animal care, horticulture, education, and infrastructure.

## RETAIL & EARNED REVENUE OVERSIGHT

- Provide strategic and operational oversight of Garden Safari Gifts, Como Friends' onsite retail operation, ensuring strong alignment with mission, sound HR practices, and robust financial performance.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & EXTERNAL RELATIONS

- Serve as the public face of Como Friends, building authentic relationships with civic, corporate, and community leaders to expand visibility, deepen engagement, and advocate for Como's impact and accessibility.
- Represent Como Friends at community events and public forums, acting as a visible and passionate spokesperson for the organization's mission and values.

## PROGRAM INNOVATION & COMMUNITY RELEVANCE

- Inspire and support staff in developing creative, mission-aligned fundraising events, donor experiences, and storytelling initiatives that deepen community connection and drive philanthropic engagement.
- Champion a culture of curiosity and responsiveness by encouraging new ideas grounded in donor and community feedback, helping Como Friends evolve its programs to remain dynamic, inclusive, and relevant.





## Compensation & Benefits

The salary range for this position is:  
\$195,000 - \$225,000.

Competitive benefits include: health insurance, dental insurance, life insurance, long-term disability insurance, short-term disability insurance, retirement plan, paid vacation, thirteen paid holidays, three paid personal days and sick leave.

### WHERE THE WORK HAPPENS

This is a primarily in-office role based at Como Friends' headquarters on the Como Park campus in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

Como Friends staff may work up to 2 days a week from home if they are able to conduct their work remotely.

The position requires occasional evening and weekend hours to attend donor meetings, community events, and board or committee gatherings.

Seasonal advocacy work will also require a presence at the State Capitol and related meetings during legislative sessions.



# MEET THE SEARCH COMMITTEE

Meet the thoughtful and committed members of the Search Committee—a dedicated group of volunteer leaders united by their love for Como and their belief in its future. This committee will help guide the process to identify the next President who can lead with vision and creativity. Their insights and stewardship will ensure the next leader is well-equipped to champion Como's continued growth and impact.



Andy Davis  
Board President



Sheila Brown  
Board Vice Chair



Wendy Harden  
Board Treasurer



Amy Hicks  
Board Member



Susan Roeder  
Past Board Member

## To Apply

To apply, send your resume and cover letter to: [apply@ballingerleafblad.com](mailto:apply@ballingerleafblad.com).

We strive for a transparent and supportive process, starting with an initial review of applications, followed by exploratory conversations with qualified candidates, in-depth interviews, and open communication throughout. There will be an immediate and ongoing review of candidates, so we encourage and appreciate early applications. All inquiries will remain confidential.

For more details or questions, inquiries may also be directed to Jamie Millard, [jamie@ballingerleafblad.com](mailto:jamie@ballingerleafblad.com).

Applications accepted until May 9, 2025. Review of materials begins immediately. **We encourage early application.**

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## Ballinger | Leafblad Search Team

Our collaborative search model is led by experienced partners who bring deep expertise in recruitment strategy, stakeholder engagement, communications, and project management—delivering a comprehensive, relationship-driven approach to identifying and securing the right leader.



Lars Leafblad

Co-Founder & Partner



Jamie Millard

Partner



Damon Shoholm

Partner



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### ABOUT BALLINGER | LEAFBLAD

Founded in 2014, Ballinger | Leafblad is a civic-focused executive search firm driven by a passion for strengthening leadership in mission-driven organizations. Rooted in partnership and a deep connection to the communities we serve, we specialize in matching organizations with exceptional leaders who align with their values and vision. Our approach is relationship-centered and designed to foster meaningful, long-term impact.

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