

Bronx Zoo zaps tram, calls it bear to maintain

BY BOB KAPPSTATTER

DAILY NEWS BRONX BUREAU CHIEF

THE BRONX ZOO'S Skyfari air tram, which stranded dozens of people for hours last year, has been permanently grounded, zoo officials said yesterday.

But they insisted the decision to send it to the scrap heap was purely financial, saying the seasonal ride was getting too expensive to maintain.

They said once the zoo gets through the current economic downturn and government budget cuts, they are looking to build a new year-round, amusement park-like attraction for zoo patrons — on the ground.

The tram, which ran from April to October, broke down on July 9, leaving about three dozen riders dangling for up to five hours over the zoo's lions and baboons. High winds and heat led to one of its gondola cars snagging a line and derailing just before closing time.

Several riders eventually were rescued with the help of a crane, which was able to reach the cars 60 to 100 feet off the ground.

Only one couple wound up suing, charging that "the psychological trauma" of being stuck for five hours "above fang-baring, flesh-eating baboons" put her pregnancy at risk.

With some 490,000 riders annually, the

30-year-old Skyfari was the zoo's third most popular attraction, after the Congo Gorilla exhibit and the monorail ride, officials said. But even so, it was becoming too expensive to maintain, they said.

"Ticket sales were just breaking even," said spokeswoman Mary Dixon, "while the capital investment to maintain it would put it into the red."

Instead, she said, "We're now looking at an indoor theater experience. A four-dimensional, ultra-sensory experience where you may feel a blast of air, or a spray of mist," similar to shows at Disney World or Universal Studios.

rkappstatter@nydailynews.com