

Written Statement of Lonnie G. Bunch III, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution
United States Senate
Committee on Rules and Administration
“Hearing to Review S.959, Smithsonian American Women's History Museum Act; and
S.1267, National Museum of the American Latino Act.”
10:00 am, Tuesday, November 17, 2020

Chairman Blunt and Ranking Member Klobuchar and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today regarding S. 1267, the National Museum of the American Latino introduced by Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ) and S. 959, the National Women’s History Museum introduced by Senator Susan Collins (R-ME).

Let me begin by saying that I am grateful you dedicated this time to explore the topic of creating additional museums at the Smithsonian. As the founding Director of our most recent addition to the Smithsonian, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, I am happy to share the insights I gained standing up a museum that began without a staff, a building, or a collection of its own.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture has demonstrated that the experiences of any community offer a way to better understand our collective national identity. Its stories are stories for everyone. It can teach any visitor something about themselves, their history, and their country. By sharing the experiences of more communities, the better we can all understand each other.

As new museum legislation is debated in Congress, it is essential to recognize that the Smithsonian is actively providing its visitors with a broader and more inclusive history. It is fitting that I take a couple of moments to highlight some of the work that we have been engaged in regarding women’s and Latino history through the Smithsonian Latino Center and the American Women’s History Initiative. The Smithsonian is deeply committed to telling an inclusive story reflective of all Americans. We take pride in the progress we have made to expand and integrate Latino and women’s history, art, culture, and scientific accomplishment into Smithsonian museums and research, education, and cultural centers.

These initiatives collaborate with the Institution’s museums, archives, research centers, record label, and traveling exhibitions to ensure that the contributions of women and the Latino community are explored, presented, celebrated, and preserved. And like the National Museum of African American History and Culture, these initiatives not only help us tell rich, complex, insightful stories about a community, they also help us all better understand our identity as Americans.

The Smithsonian launched the American Women’s History Initiative—Because Of Her Story—in 2018. The initiative is one of the country’s most ambitious undertakings to research, collect, document, display, and share the compelling story of women. It is inclusive, highlighting the stories of those who identify as women.

The Initiative has established an internal pool of funds focused on Programs and Education, Digital Projects & Audience Development, and Collections Care, and Acquisitions and Exhibitions. These funds support Smithsonian projects focused on telling more diverse stories of women and girls in America. Our fiscal year 2021 pool, once it is appropriated, will focus on virtual programs, education outreach, and new acquisitions, while the digital pool fund will make collections about women and girls more discoverable online.

The American Women's History Initiative has also hired six curators who are focused on American women's history and we expect to hire three additional curators this year. These hires are important because curators are essential to building our collections. In addition, we have allocated resources towards internships. In 2019 we launched the eight-week paid *Because of Her Story Cohort Internship Program* and hosted a cohort of thirteen undergraduate and graduate student interns at the Smithsonian.

The Initiative published its first book in October 2019, *Smithsonian American Women: Remarkable Objects and Stories of Strength, Ingenuity and Vision from the National Collection*. Featuring over 135 essays from 95 Smithsonian authors across 16 museums and archives, the book offers a panoramic look at women's history through the Smithsonian's incomparable collections. In one year, the book sold more than 7,000 copies.

I am pleased to mention that Congress showed faith in the Initiative when it passed the Women's Suffrage Centennial Commemorative Coin Act in November 2019 and directed the Treasury to mint and issue silver dollar coins emblematic of women who were instrumental to the 19th Amendment, with surcharges from the coins' sales benefitting the American Women's History Initiative. We are very appreciative of this legislation being signed into public law. Provided all 400,000 coins are sold, the estimated revenue paid to the Smithsonian Institution's American Women's History Initiative would total \$4 million.

The Initiative has also been involved in the creation of world-class exhibitions. The exhibition *Votes for Women: A Portrait of Persistence*, at the National Portrait Gallery from March 2019 – January 2020, outlined the 80-year plus movement for women to obtain the right to vote as part of the larger struggle for equality that continues today. *Girlhood! (It's Complicated)*, which opened at the National Museum of American History in October 2020, explores how girls have been on the front lines of social and cultural change and engages in timely conversations about youth movements and women's history. The exhibition will go on a United States tour in 2023.

The American Women's History Initiative's digital efforts have been aimed at increasing trusted online sources about American women's historical contributions, audience engagement, and the gender balance. Through a strategic partnership with Wikipedia, the Initiative has trained Smithsonian Affiliates to work with volunteers to include local women's history resources in some of the American Women's History Initiative nationwide campaigns. The collaboration has had great success getting Smithsonian resources into the hands of the public. Thus far, the Initiative has hosted 12 edit-a-thons with seven external partners, resulting in the generation of over 2 million views of Smithsonian content.

Finally, the American Women's History Initiative hosts an annual symposium series, "American Women of Science: Recovering History, Defining the Future," as part of its efforts to increase the presence of women's history online and by publishing new resources about American women and girls on the web and social media.

Similarly, since 1997, the Latino Center has made a concerted effort to expand representation of Latino Americans at the Smithsonian. A few current examples include:

- The Latino Museum Studies Program, established before the Latino Center in 1994, brings 12 graduate students for an immersive experience in museum practice each year. Thirteen program alumni currently work at the Smithsonian. They are among a total of 325 alumni, many of whom are working in other museums and cultural institutions, as well as in the academy (museum-adjacent scholars).
- Since 2010, the Smithsonian has added 12 Latino content experts through the Latino Curatorial Initiative. These experts drive research, organize exhibitions, build collections, create public and educational programs, inform online web-based/digital content, publish, and mentor Smithsonian interns and fellows. In 2018, the Initiative won the American Alliance of Museum's prestigious Diversity, Equity, Accessibility and Inclusion Award, and is now considered best practice in the museum field.
- At the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the deputy chief curator and curator of Latino art has built the largest collection of U. S. Latino art for any of the major art museums in the country. The collection grew from 553 objects in 2010 to 1,179 as of August 2020. We are continuing to accession important objects into this collection.
- *¡Pleibol! In the Barrios and the Big Leagues*, opening next April at the National Museum of American History, demonstrates the historic role baseball has played as a social and cultural force within Latino communities across the nation for over a century, and how Latinos have influenced and changed the game. A traveling version of the exhibition produced through our Traveling Exhibition Service will tour the US at the same time in places like Pueblo, Colorado and Saginaw, Michigan.

I want to express my gratitude to Congress for your ongoing support of the Latino Initiatives Pool. These federal funds, managed by the Smithsonian Latino Center, provide support to Smithsonian museums and research centers for research, collections, exhibitions, conservation, educational content, and professional development programs that further the understanding and appreciation of U.S. Latino contributions in the areas of science, history, art, and culture. Since 1995, over 400 Smithsonian programs and projects have received funding from the pool, totaling over \$32.6 million. In fiscal year 2020, the Pool distributed \$1.6 million in support of 27 projects across the Smithsonian. These projects included five upcoming exhibitions and programs, eight collecting and archive initiatives, nine educational and access initiatives, and five research programs, among other areas of support. The Latino Initiatives Pool also provided \$864,000 to the Latino Curatorial Initiative, enabling Smithsonian museums to hire curators, archivists, curatorial assistants, and other professionals.

Currently, we are building the Molina Family Latino Gallery at the National Museum of American History and installing its inaugural exhibition, *¡Presente! A Latino History of the United States*. When it opens in spring 2022, this 4,500-foot exhibition space will be the first national Latino gallery on the National Mall and the leading interpretive gallery devoted to exploring the richness and diversity of Latino history, culture, and identity in the United States. This unique gallery will offer exciting temporary exhibitions and engaging educational and cultural programs over the course of ten years, making it an integral part of the Smithsonian. The Latino Initiatives Pool provided \$2.5 million to the Molina Family Latino Gallery.

I am proud of the work that the Smithsonian Latino Center and the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative have been engaged in and the ongoing federal support of our efforts.

This work makes the Smithsonian more effective, vibrant, and meaningful by embracing an inclusive vision of our history and culture. I know that this Committee shares our vision of telling a complete history of our nation.

While my memories of opening the National Museum of African American History and Culture are vivid, so are my memories of how difficult it was. I quickly realized that the opening was still just the beginning of a long journey. As head of the Institution that will be responsible for any new museums, it is my obligation to make sure that Congress is fully aware of what it means to place this responsibility on the Smithsonian.

Before even considering any new museum there is much we have to explore and gauge the public's expectations. This means the appropriate size, programming, new technology, and collections. We must contemplate the needs of housing staff and collections for a museum and determine if those needs can be met on site. There must also be a suitable location for a new museum. These buildings are meant to be powerful symbols of how we, as a nation, value the contributions represented in their works.

I know firsthand that there is never a perfect time for adding a new museum to the Smithsonian, but that challenge is now compounded by the significant financial strain posed by our existing, aging infrastructure. Additionally, due to the current pandemic, there are new needs for changes to that infrastructure and technological requirements. We must first understand that the needs of our public have changed. We need to reaffirm our relationship with established audiences as they adapt to an unfamiliar new reality. We need to assess how our audiences' needs have changed and how they will continue to evolve moving forward. The data we see suggest that our audiences will prefer spaces with freedom of movement and outdoor options. It may be a while before they feel comfortable engaging in activities as part of a crowd. Whether we offer hand sanitizer and other amenities, limit the number of visitors, shift from touch screens to voice-activated interfaces or other innovative technology, or move programs outdoors, it is our job to create contexts in which our audiences feel safe when they return. We also must not lose sight of new opportunities that exist to reach audience digitally and beyond physical spaces in Washington D.C., which have the potential to engage a broader and more diverse public in a deeper way. All these considerations must be incorporated into any discussion related to the design, construction, and operation of future museums.

While I know everyone would like to know how much a new museum would cost at the outset, we simply do not have enough information at this time to provide a precise answer. The costs of construction are intimately tied to site selection and any challenges the location might present. Given expected construction cost increases and the challenges of the preferred sites, a comparable new museum will likely exceed the costs of building the National Museum of African American History and Culture—\$570 million for its construction and collections.

It is also important to note that the costs do not end with construction. The annual operating costs of a museum alone are significant, but the true costs are spread throughout the Institution. Many functions of the Smithsonian are centralized, such as maintenance, security, and general counsel to name a few. We must also consider our intellectual capacity. We cannot let additional museums detract from our ability to appropriately staff and support the work of all of our museums, galleries, and central support units.

Finally, it is important that Congress understands the impact new museums could have on our ability to maintain our aging infrastructure. Several of our iconic buildings are slated for, or are currently undergoing, extensive revitalizations. Others need renovations, but work has been deferred due to competing priorities. As this Committee is aware, our backlog of maintenance costs has exceeded \$1 billion. I would like to thank you for the bipartisan support you have shown by helping us manage this challenge and supporting a more sustainable path for the Institution. Since becoming Secretary, I have directed our facilities office to begin analyzing our backlog building by building. This has helped us to identify the areas where our limited resources can have the greatest impact. Combining strategic maintenance decisions and capital revitalization projects will move us closer to a sustainable rate. Congress must understand that bringing a new museum to fruition will significantly increase these challenges, and we must plan for that from the onset.

When building the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Congress and the Administration were essential partners in its success. As Secretary, I would take the same viewpoint. If Congress deems that it is time to move forward on any new museums, it is imperative that we work collaboratively to ensure we can meet all our challenges, new and old.

I am appreciative that Congress has shown trust in the Smithsonian to build and operate world-class museums. I also know that Members of this committee are aware that if Congress deems it time to move forward on any new museum proposals, it must be done in a way that does not place additional burdens on our existing priorities. Creating a new museum is an exceptional commitment, and Congress must fully understand what that means as they deliberate over proposals.

Thank you again for holding this hearing, for your ongoing support of the Institution, and for your commitment to sharing the experiences of all Americans. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.