

**Written Statement of Dr. David J. Skorton, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution**

**Testimony on the State of the Smithsonian**

**Committee on Rules and Administration, U.S. Senate**

**March 27, 2019**

Chairman Blunt, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the state of the Smithsonian today and how I think it can be an even more valued and impactful resource for all Americans and the world in the years and decades to come.

As you may know, my time at the Smithsonian is coming to an end in June. For the past three-and-a-half years, I have been fortunate to head this uniquely American institution, the world's largest museum, education, and research complex. As I transition into the next stage of my career, I know that the Smithsonian will have many opportunities to even better serve the American public and to capitalize on the strengths of our museums, research centers, libraries, and education centers—if we avoid potential pitfalls ahead.

So today, I would like to focus on what this cherished Institution means to me, what it means to the American people, and what its future holds.

The breadth of the Smithsonian's endeavor is breathtaking and unparalleled. Our collections are vast, representing an incredible scope and depth of artistic, historical, cultural, and scientific achievement. We are an internationally respected scientific and cultural institution that does cutting-edge research in many disciplines. Our 21 libraries collectively form one of the world's great repositories of knowledge. We have a vast array of educational material that learners of all ages can access online, in classrooms, and in our museums. Throughout the world, there is nothing like the Smithsonian. It all starts with our people, but I'd like to focus today on our facilities, many of which are National Historic Landmarks imbued with historic and architectural value.

Just as importantly, they are critical components of the visitor experience. We need to make them safe for tourists and employees alike. They need to function in order to enable our programs, exhibitions, research, and scholarship. And they must protect and preserve our collections held within—the nation's collective memory and identity.

The Smithsonian buildings host millions of visitors each year. Each of our visitors, researchers, and staff relies on our facilities being operational and dependable. Our Office of Facilities Management and Reliability has been able to maintain many of our critical systems beyond their intended lives, like those at the National Air and Space Museum. Thanks to Congress's

support, we have been able to begin a much-needed revitalization of this testament to American ingenuity and humankind's yearning to "slip the surly bonds of Earth."

With a deferred maintenance backlog of nearly a billion dollars, there is still much we must do beyond the Air and Space Museum. With our 19 museums and galleries, 9 research centers, and the National Zoo in addition to leased spaces for support functions, we must care for 13.9 million square feet of buildings.

Prioritizing the long-term care of our facilities is a sound and critical investment. Pennies spent on maintenance now can save dollars in the future. In their wisdom, Congress and the Administration have recognized the need for that investment and have supported steady increases to our maintenance throughout my time as Secretary. In FY 2020, the President's budget requested \$84.5 Million for our facilities maintenance; an increase of 6% above the FY 2019 enacted level of \$80 Million. We are committed to continuing on this path toward a more sustainable level of care to our physical facilities, and thankful that you all have stood by us in this effort.

In a short time, our leadership will change but our challenges will remain. In the coming years, it will be important to build on the progress we have made. Our facilities are the foundation on which our reputation was built and our future success relies.

The growing backlog forces us to make difficult choices. With a backlog of maintenance issues this large, we find ourselves having to focus on reacting to problems instead of proactively maintaining assets. Depending on the issue, reactive maintenance can be 10 to 100 times more costly than preemptive maintenance.

So far, we have been lucky to avoid some serious catastrophes. Recently at the Natural History Museum, an aging pipe from the 1960's that should have been replaced decades ago ruptured and flooded a collection storage area with hundreds of gallons of water. Miraculously, no artifacts or specimens were damaged. However, there are literally miles of pipe from the same era still in use there today.

At the National Zoo, we are constantly making emergency repairs to aging steam pipes that heat habitats that house some of the most endangered animals in the world. Our maintenance team has been incredible in their rapid response to these emergencies, but the need to constantly manage crises means that we fall further into a reactive state of operations.

Events beyond our control can also contribute to maintenance needs. Several of our buildings suffered damage in the 2011 earthquake, and the roof of one of our collections storage buildings collapsed in the infamous "Snowmageddon" of 2010.

Ultimately, moving from reactive care to preventive care would result in reduced overall maintenance costs, fewer breakdowns, energy savings, and decreased unplanned closures.

If things fall into severe disrepair, they can become much more costly capital projects, as we are currently seeing with the Smithsonian Castle. With Congress' support for our FY 2020 Facilities Planning and Design Request, we will begin design work for major revitalization projects including this iconic and historic site.

The choices will not get any easier in the years ahead, as a spate of museums built from the 1960s to the 1980s, like Air and Space, are also in need of revitalization and imminently require attention. The planning and design funding requested in FY 2020 will begin to address the future of the Arts and Industries Building and several other planned building projects. These projects, along with the Castle, represent the core components of our twenty-year plan for the South Mall, a series of capital projects required after decades of deferred maintenance.

As part of our planning process, we continually look for new approaches, materials, and designs to reduce the long-term maintenance needs of our buildings, improve their efficiency, and enable them to operate more sustainably.

All of these projects are necessary in some measure because of our continued popularity as a destination. The tens of millions of visitors from across the world who pass through our doors every year put wear and tear on facilities, and they come in greater volume than we could have ever anticipated. When Air and Space was built, we expected 2.5 million visitors per year, not the 7.3 million we see annually today. When Natural History was built in 1910, the thought of 6.9 million visitors per year was simply unfathomable.

Similarly incomprehensible was the fact that one day we would have 155 million objects and specimens in our collections needing to be stored, maintained, and prepared for research and display. To most of our visitors, the collections we have largely define the Smithsonian. That is because there is nothing like the real thing to inspire imagination and spark a lifetime of learning. Our collections span the breadth of human interest and knowledge. From the smallest insect to the Space Shuttle Discovery, from Georgia O'Keeffe's *Yellow Calla* oil painting to the biplane used to train the Tuskegee Airmen, our artifacts and specimens are what draw people to our museums. Our collections are a vital national asset, and we are always striving to improve storage conditions, striking a balance between preserving the collections and providing access to them.

The spaces that house and preserve our collections are not immune from deterioration either, with many deferred to the point of requiring capital projects. For example, we continue to use spaces in our Garber facility that were meant to be temporary when constructed in the 1950s. In FY 2020, we will continue design development for the new MSC-Suitland Pod 6 collections storage building that will include a jointly-funded storage space for the National Gallery of Art.

By partnering, we gain a shared facility that will address the needs of both the Smithsonian Institution and the Gallery at significantly lower cost than two independent facilities. Our collections space framework plan outlines a strategy for improving all our collections facilities, but it is a long-term plan and maintenance needs will continue as we work to implement it.

The collections are only the starting point for a voyage of discovery and inspiration. They are valuable resources for scientists from federal agencies such as the Departments of Agriculture and Defense, and the United States Geological Survey.

We use collections acquired a century or more ago to examine our changing planet, the spread of invasive species, and the loss of biological diversity. Federal, state, and local authorities use our collections to answer questions about volcanic eruptions, oil spills, and airplane accidents caused by bird strikes.

Our scholars, researchers, educators, and curators compose a part of the Institution that is equally important to maintain as our facilities and collections: our intellectual capital. The Smithsonian's big thinkers are tackling some of the world's most vexing challenges.

For example, to help mitigate the effects of the extinction of multiple species of coral, the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute is creating a large repository of frozen coral tissue. It is critical to the more than 1 billion people worldwide who rely on coral for food, medicine, and their livelihoods.

Smithsonian scientists work alongside public health officials to help prevent the next major pandemic. Veterinary scientists and pathologists from the National Zoo and the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute conduct regional wildlife pathology workshops to train biologists and conservationists to recognize, identify, and stop the next global health threat in its initial stages.

These and other Smithsonian projects foster international collaboration and bring together governments, foundations, and global thought leaders and scientists. We bridge cultural and scientific disciplines and borders, whether rescuing art from the rubble of damaged galleries and museums, helping to save endangered species, or inspiring tomorrow's artists, scientists, and leaders across disciplines.

For our continued success, the Smithsonian must continue to attract and keep the people who preserve and put our artifacts in context, interpret why they are important, and explain that to the world. We never know when something in our collections will lead to a new line of scholarly inquiry.

The Smithsonian's strategic plan outlines a path to achieving greater reach, greater relevance, and more profound impact, and technology is at the heart of that. One goal is to reach a billion

people annually with a digital-first strategy. Another is to understand and influence 21st-century audiences.

It is why we have put so much time and effort into enhancing the museum experience with technology and digitizing our collections at an accelerating pace.

And if we are to fully serve 21st-century audiences, we will have to be more inclusive, more accessible, and more diverse. Cultural institutions are uniquely equipped to inspire, and we can magnify that ability when we truly reflect the rich tapestry of humanity.

That spirit inspired us to begin the creation of the first ever Latino Gallery, and with the help of Congress, to establish the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative. Each will draw from across the Institution for content and programming.

And our newest museum, the inspiring and thought-provoking National Museum of African American History and Culture, is the embodiment of the need to more fully represent our visitors and society at large.

I will take numerous Smithsonian memories with me for the rest of my life, but perhaps the most enduring will be the opening of that museum, a joyous celebration that seemed to overflow from D.C. to the rest of the nation. It was a moment long overdue, but one worth the wait.

The African American Museum has succeeded wildly in telling the full story of America through the lens of one people's experience. It is a public square for Americans to unite around our shared values and experiences while engaging in needed discussions about racial divisions and social inequities. It brings together artifacts, programs, and scholarship in a profound way. And the building itself, rising proudly on the National Mall in the heart of our democratic seat of governance, symbolizes the diversity and inclusion that strengthens the nation. Since its September 2016 grand opening, this museum has welcomed more than 5 million people.

I am so proud of my time here and the things accomplished by my colleagues during my tenure. We demonstrated that we can convene important conversations that enter the public consciousness. We showed that the Smithsonian is resilient and as relevant now as it has been during its first 173 years of existence. And we proved once again that our people are the real magic of this place. My colleagues' skill, curiosity, and dedication are unparalleled. Though there are challenges ahead, as with any institution, new and exciting opportunities await on the horizon.

Five decades ago, one of my predecessors, Smithsonian Secretary S. Dillon Ripley, wrote a statement to Congress about one of the defining moments of humanity that happened in 1969, the moment when Neil Armstrong became the first human being to set foot on another celestial body. As Ripley wrote, "Through the astronauts all of us have now somehow touched

the moon.” He noted that the Smithsonian had played a small part in the triumph, because his own predecessor, the fourth Smithsonian Secretary, Charles Walcott, had worked to create the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, the precursor to NASA.

In the next 50 years, who knows what advances await us? Perhaps we will colonize Mars, cure deadly diseases, or eradicate global famine. We may even discover life on another planet. If we do, it may be thanks to the Giant Magellan Telescope, a massive ground-based telescope our Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory is helping develop as a part of an international consortium.

Efforts like these to answer life’s big questions and solve our thorniest problems will take a concerted effort from government, the private sector, individuals, and institutions. I believe it will also take the wisdom of the arts and humanities integrated with the sciences. I am confident that the Smithsonian will continue to be a critical voice in those efforts, adding valuable insights in the spheres of art, culture, history, science, and education.

Thank you for your continuing support. The Congress makes it possible for the Smithsonian to remain a dynamic institution that can adapt to the ever-changing needs of the American people. It has been my honor to serve as Secretary.

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