

# OVERSIGHT OF THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

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HEARING  
BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON RULES AND  
ADMINISTRATION  
UNITED STATES SENATE  
ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS  
SECOND SESSION

—————  
TUESDAY, JUNE 18, 2024  
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COMMITTEE ON RULES AND ADMINISTRATION

SECOND SESSION

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## OVERSIGHT OF THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

TUESDAY, JUNE 18, 2024

UNITED STATES SENATE  
COMMITTEE ON RULES AND ADMINISTRATION  
*Washington, DC.*

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:45 p.m., in Room 301, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. Amy Klobuchar, Chairwoman of the Committee, presiding.

**Present:** Senators Klobuchar, Fischer, Warner, Butler, and Britt.

### **OPENING STATEMENT OF HONORABLE AMY KLOBUCHAR, CHAIRWOMAN, A UNITED STATES SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF MINNESOTA**

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Good afternoon. I call to order this hearing of the Rules Committee on Oversight of the Smithsonian. I would like to thank Ranking Member Fischer and our colleagues for being here, as well as Secretary of the Smithsonian, Lonnie Bunch.

I will note that I was saying to Deb that we actually got bling from you guys. Like, we never get anything here from the Rules Committee and this is very cool—your pocket guide to the Smithsonian. We welcome you once again to the Committee, Secretary. I know that you planned the announcement of the return of the pandas to coincide with our hearing, so thank you.

Today's hearing is an opportunity to discuss the ongoing priorities and what is next for the Smithsonian as it works to maintain and share with the public its vast collection of treasures, including some that you have brought for us today, including from a Minnesota perspective.

Everyone should go over and see these items when we are done here. A comic book about Minnesota's own Hubert Humphrey. These are just part of the institution's nearly 157 million artifacts, in addition to the 2.25 million volumes in its 21 research libraries. Its collection is just part of what makes the Smithsonian a global leader.

In fact, since its founding in 1846, the Smithsonian has grown to become the world's largest museum, education, and research complex, and its researchers are tackling cutting edge questions at the frontiers of science.

Earlier this year, Deputy Secretary of the Smithsonian Park testified in this Committee about the impact that AI is having on the institution and the work researchers are doing to harness its poten-

tial from astrophysics to conservation efforts while guarding against risks.

Importantly the Smithsonian is reaching people in all 50 states and across the globe. In recent years, it has broadened public access through its online resources, welcoming nearly 170 million visitors to its website last year. This has expanded the Smithsonian's reach, building on the many millions of in-person visits, 17.7 million last year, that it hosted in its 21 museums and the National Zoo, sites that have remained popular and in some cases far more popular than expected over time.

To cite one example, the National Air and Space Museum was originally designed for 2 million visitors annually, but it is so popular that it has welcomed many more visitors, up to 7 million a year. We look forward to the completion of the Air and Space Museum's needed renovations, and to it fully reopening, and in time for the country's 250th anniversary in July 2026, along with other cultural activities that Secretary Bunch is planning to honor 250 years that will be taking place on the National Mall.

I also look forward to hearing about the ongoing efforts with the two new museums established with bipartisan support after legislation passed this Committee unanimously in 2020, the American Women's History Museum and the National Museum of the American Latino.

Progress is well underway with fundraising for both new museums at over \$65 million each. That is \$65 million each—private money for the two museums.

There are two open sites on the National Mall that would look even better with the new museums, as the Smithsonian Board of Regents has determined, and the work to develop these museums is ongoing. Dr. Elizabeth Babcock started work as Director of the Women's Museum this month, joining Jorge Zamanillo, founding Director of the Latino Museum, and staff are working hard to build these collections.

These museums represent a critical opportunity to help families visiting Washington to learn about the remarkable contributions of Latino Americans and women to the fabric of our country and our shared American story.

At the same time, we know that addressing the backlog maintenance project at the institution must remain a priority. I look forward to hearing about the Smithsonian's work to assess its facilities and what else is needed to complete ongoing maintenance and repair projects to protect collections for future generations.

The Smithsonian will continue to play a critical role in preserving and telling our country's history, and at the same time, it will write new chapters through its groundbreaking research.

I know I forever cherish my photo that is in a little black and white polaroid from eighth grade when I made my first visit to Washington and posed in what is now, I know, an antiquated astronaut costume with my face in it that went right in my scrapbook proudly displayed on the first page.

So many kids are having that same experience, maybe a little more modernized. Thank you, Secretary, for being here. I will now recognize Ranking Member Fischer for her opening statement.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HONORABLE DEB FISCHER, A  
UNITED STATES SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF NEBRASKA**

Senator FISCHER. Thank you, Chairwoman Klobuchar for calling this oversight hearing today. I want to thank our witness. Welcome, Secretary Bunch. As Secretary, you are steward of 21 museums and research facilities, the National Zoo and a growing collection of over 155 million objects and specimens.

Speaking of the National Zoo, congratulations, Mr. Secretary, to you and your team on the exciting news that the zoo will welcome a new pair of pandas, Bao Li and Qing Bao. We are grateful that you——

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. I did not know you knew them personally. That is impressive.

[Laughter.]

Senator FISCHER. I get out. I get out. We are going to see them at the end of the year is my understanding. It is a national treasure, our Smithsonian, and we are grateful that you are joining us today to tell us about the Smithsonian's successes and also the challenges that it faces. Over the past several Congresses, my colleagues and I have regularly heard about the challenges faced by the Smithsonian, including its deferred maintenance backlog.

I understand the deferred maintenance backlog has tripled in the last several years, now totaling \$3.3 billion. In addition to the deferred maintenance on the public facing museum, this amount includes deferred maintenance for the 700,000 square feet of space in aging storage facilities that are inadequate to house these important institution's collections.

The nation is so fortunate to have the Smithsonian's collections, and the buildings to store and display them are foundational to protecting them for future generations. I am looking forward to seeing the paperweight that you brought from William Jennings Bryan when he was Secretary of State under Woodrow Wilson.

It is, I understand, a plowshare, which he had swords turned into plowshares before the First World War. I find that amazing, so I am looking forward to seeing that. As we look to the needs that the Smithsonian has, it is especially crucial as the museums and the Smithsonian continues to expand.

In 2020, Congress authorized two new museums, the National Museum of the American Latino and the Smithsonian of American Women's History Museum. I look forward to hearing about efforts to address the deferred maintenance backlog while balancing the addition of these two new museums.

Of course, the museum buildings in Washington, DC are not the only way that Americans experience the Smithsonian. I have heard wonderful things about the traveling exhibits of the Smithsonian's Museum on Main Street. This partnership between the Smithsonian's Travel Exhibitions Service and State Humanities Councils brings the Smithsonian out of Washington.

I was pleased to see Nebraska included in this endeavor over the last year. The Voices and Votes, Democracy in America exhibit made stops in Howells, Kearney, Belvidere, Wahoo, Gering, and Omaha, and I got to see it in Kearney. The Waterways Exhibit at the Kearney Rails and Trails Museum opened on March 2nd.

I was delighted to have the Smithsonian come to Nebraska, and I want to congratulate the many Nebraskans who coordinated with the Smithsonian to make this happen. Initiatives like Museums on Main Street connect the Smithsonian to Nebraskans and to all Americans nationwide who are unable to visit here in Washington.

I hope to hear more about the ways the Smithsonian is seeking to connect with Americans and increase that access to its collections. Thank you again for being here, Secretary. It is an excellent opportunity for Committee Members to learn more about the challenges and the opportunities facing the Smithsonian. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Thank you, Ranking Member Fischer. As I noted, our witness today is Lonnie Bunch. He became the 14th Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution in June of 2019. Secretary Bunch previously served as a founding director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, which welcomed its 10 millionth visitor in September—impressive.

Secretary Bunch is a published author and has held many teaching positions. Earlier in his career, he worked for the National Museum of American History and the Chicago Historical Society. He received his undergraduate and graduate degrees from American University. I will now swear in our witness.

Do you swear that the testimony you give before the Committee shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Mr. BUNCH. I do.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Thank you. You can be seated, and we will now proceed to your testimony and recognize you for five minutes. Thank you.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF LONNIE G. BUNCH III, SECRETARY,  
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, WASHINGTON, DC**

Mr. BUNCH. Thank you. Good afternoon, Chairwoman Klobuchar, Ranking Member Fischer, and Members of the Committee.

I want to thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today, because it has been a couple of years since I last met with you, and in that time, the Smithsonian has seen approximately 34 million in-person visits to our museums, education centers, and research facilities.

We have become an increasingly digital institution, seeking out partners to implement technologies smartly and safely, so we can bring the vast resource of the Smithsonian to people around the country. With the help of Congress, some of our renowned buildings like the Castle and the National Air and Space Museum, have been undergoing substantially and needed renovations.

This enduring institution has meant so much to the American people and the citizens of the world for 178 years. It is nearly impossible to adequately describe all that we do, from protecting cultural heritage in war-torn nations, to helping people explore their genealogy, to examining the surface of Mars.

We engage with and educate people on important topics like the essence of the American experience, the diversity of the world's cultures, the sustainability of the planet, and the nature of the uni-

verse. In some ways, we are at the center of civic, educational, scientific, and artistic life of the nation, and our international reach to more than 100 countries includes robust research programs, partnerships, and knowledge exchanges. Finally, we are responsible for the safety and security of more than 6,500 employees, more than 3,800 on-site volunteers, and millions of annual visitors to our museum.

My vision for the Smithsonian's future is to be a reservoir of knowledge that anyone can dip into it anytime, anyplace. It is embodied in the way that we have expanded our educational research with a presence in every state in the Union and dozens of countries worldwide. In the fiscal year 2023, more than 600,000 educators and students used the resources of our learning lab, and nearly 3 million students used our Smithsonian Science in the Classroom Curriculum.

We can see a glimpse of the Smithsonian's future in our two new Congressionally authorized museums. These museums will not only help us tell a more robust, expansive, and inclusive version of America, but they will also be built as the first digital-first museums. Their programming has already begun reaching audiences well before concrete is poured.

Building new museums is something I know, and it requires a massive outlay of money, as do other needs inherent in buildings in such a vast institution like the Smithsonian. From addressing deferred maintenance, to meeting increased salary requirements, we increased our reach and impact by collaborating with other agencies, organizations, and governments whose goals align with us. We rely heavily on the generosity of donors and the public who value all the work that we do. We are grateful candidly that for the past three years have been the most record-breaking philanthropy the Smithsonian's ever had. Of course, the United States Congress remains our most valuable partner. We take our fiscal responsibility seriously and look to spend taxpayers' dollars conscientiously in a way that maximizes our reach and our impact.

Our strategic plan lays out bold goals for the Smithsonian's future. Our actions over the past few years reflect those goals. To be more digital and ways to reach more Americans. To be nimbler and more effective in our operations. To elevate our scientific endeavors. To expand our educational efforts, and to really be a more trusted source. This will be foundational to my goal of reaching every home and being in every classroom across the nation.

The nation's 250th anniversary in 2026 will be a pivotal moment for us to unveil just how much progress we have made. It will serve as a celebration of what we have been, but also give a glimpse of what we can be. We plan to activate the National Mall with a vibrant cultural festival, and the renovated National Air and Space Museum should be fully open to the public in time for the commemoration. I have asked my colleagues as well to work towards opening, at least temporarily, the Castle for the public for that celebration as well.

To coincide with those milestones, we have programming that both celebrates and contemplates who we are as a nation and the Smithsonian's place in it. We will invite Americans to explore all corners of our complex histories and find ways to have honest con-

versations that transcend our differences and connect our shared humanity. It will be an opportunity for us to showcase the myriad ways in which the Smithsonian has become nimbler, more relevant, and more effective. Our institution is undergoing a transformation.

Like any moment, it is filled with challenges, but I would argue more than anything, it is a moment of opportunity to truly fulfill the vision of our founder, James Smithson. Decades before it was built, he foresaw this institution as a gift to the American people. Recently, a couple of announcements highlighted the Smithsonian's global reach.

The first, of course, we were able to secure giant pandas to the National Zoo. I have always felt the key was never to be the Secretary who lost to pandas, and I am so pleased to say that as a result of the hard work, we will have the pandas by the end of the year.

But also, a team led by the Smithsonian, the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration, created the National Ocean Biodiversity Strategy. It is a vital plan for ocean conservation, and it is a first nationwide strategy to improve scientists' ability to serve and to gather knowledge on critical biodiversity.

Both speak to our ability to work collaboratively, to think creatively, to act decisively, to help find solutions to the world's biggest challenge. I am more confident than ever that the Smithsonian is uniquely positioned to do this.

Thank you for this hearing, and most importantly, for your ongoing support and your commitment to work with us. I am happy to answer any questions you have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Bunch was submitted for the record.]

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Very good. Well, that is exciting. I had not focused on the 250th anniversary. We tend to focus on right now, today, in this place. I think that is really exciting. Two hundred and fifty years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence and such an opportunity to reflect on our great nation. How long has it been since the Castle was opened?

Mr. BUNCH. The Castle just closed about a year ago.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Okay. Then you are going to reopen parts of it?

Mr. BUNCH. Right. The goal is that the amount of work that has to be done in the Castle—the initial plan was for the Castle basically to have the Mall torn up during the 250th. I said, we cannot do that.

What we are going to do is do interior work so that we can have the Castle open for the 250th, and then after the 250th, we will do all the earthquake work that is going to tear the—that is going to really help make it difficult for people to visit the Castle.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Okay. You know, since the pandemic, I was just seeing that your average visitors up in Air and Space, before you closed down for the work I assume, 7 million. But you know, what has it been like? Because a lot of people were worried we would not bounce back.

Mr. BUNCH. I think the numbers have been really good. We are now at pre-pandemic levels throughout the entire Smithsonian.

Then couple that with all the digital work we are doing, we are reaching more people than ever before.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Can you talk about that, what you have done to make it more accessible, the museum, virtually, for people maybe in a little town in Nebraska, farmers that are not going to be able to leave and—or, you know, because they have got their crop coming in. Talk about how you have made this accessible.

Mr. BUNCH. What I realized is that the Smithsonian needed to have people who really could help us lead the digital transformation.

I created a unit to do just that. We are really looking at how to really be in every home and in every classroom. Part of what we are doing is making sure that we find the right partners that we can collaborate with. Because I have realized that the Smithsonian, no matter how creative it is, does not have broad enough shoulders to do everything.

We are working with a variety of entities to make sure that we can digitally share the information we want to do, but also we are partnering with people like the 4-H clubs and looking at different organizations that have never worked with the Smithsonian to allow us to reach these many communities.

I think what I have really said to everybody is the 250th is our opportunity to demonstrate all of that change. I am using that as the marker to say, we are going to do everything so that by the 250th you can see a new Smithsonian.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Very good. Let's talk about the two new museums. When you last appeared before the Committee, we talked about the ongoing efforts to establish the museum. Since then, as I noted, they both hired founding directors. We have got that over \$65 million for each museum, private money.

The efforts are going forward to build the collections. There is a lot of excitement, bipartisan excitement in both Houses for moving forward. While it is not at this point a funding issue as much as the location, could you—and we have been able to establish now with the agreement of both groups two locations that I have seen.

I think they are really a good idea. What can you tell us briefly about that progress? What is being done to talk to the public about this? Well answer that first.

Mr. BUNCH. Well, I think that first of all, things are going very well with these museums. The \$65 million that was raised is really important.

When I was building the African American Museum, it took me four years to get to \$65 million, so there is already a great deal of excitement about these new museums. But also, what I have said is that these new museums, even though they are not—they do not have a building, they have got to share content. They have got to do things digitally.

We are doing programs, education programs around the country through the lens of each of these museums to build excitement, to let people know about it. Candidly, the hiring of Elizabeth Babcock as the new director, that is a way to sort of get more attention because she is new, there is a lot of articles about her.

Basically, the goal here is to begin to do work to say the history of women, the history of Latinos, cannot wait for a decade. It has got to be done now. We are looking at different ways to do that. How do we make sure that we are doing programs around the country now to build that support? I think that from a vantage point of where we are, we are in a good place.

The challenge, candidly, is finalizing the sites because fundraising will pick up even more when you are able to finalize a site. Two, you cannot plan on what the museums will be without those sites. Therefore, it is really hard to sort of keep people excited as you are saying, eventually we can tell you what is going to be there.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. I mean, it is kind of extraordinary. All these funds have been raised without the sites. But before Senator Fischer was the Ranking, Senator Blunt and I went out and looked at the sites.

Could you talk about those sites and how they fit in with the vision of the—I know the Board of Regents has approved these sites? Architects, historians, preservations are consistent with this area of the Mall in our Nation's Capitol.

Mr. BUNCH. Well, I looked at 26 sites around Washington. We looked at sites that were vacant. We looked at sites that were historic buildings. After looking at all these sites, we realized that what was essential was to have these museums as close to the Mall as possible. That the Mall is where the world comes to understand what it means to be an American, and to be able to have women's history and Latino history on the Mall was crucially important.

We looked at these sites, one that we call the South Monument site, which is across from the National Museum of African American History and Culture, which is this really sort of gem like site that is going to be the spot for the Women's History Museum. Then we have another site that is behind the Holocaust Museum that would be the site of the Latino Museum.

What is important is that these sites allow several things. One, there is great excitement in the various communities that they are going to be able to build these museums on the Mall. Two, it allows these museums to craft architectural vision. To be able to say, we want a building that reflects our culture, much like we did with the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

There is great excitement about the potential of new buildings on new sites. Candidly, while there is always a question of how do you preserve green space, what I love is the building of the African American Museum has enriched the Mall.

It has not encountered—it has not hurt the Mall at all. I think these new museums will do the same thing.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Okay. Very good. Thank you. I will turn it over to Ranking Member Fischer.

Senator FISCHER. Thank you, Chairwoman Klobuchar. Secretary Bunch, in February, Nebraska's Winnebago tribal chairwoman and council members visited the National Museum of the American Indians Cultural Resources Center, and they viewed some of their cultural artifacts at that time.

They told me that it was a very powerful experience for them, and that your staff there was extremely helpful. Thank you very

much. While they have not yet made an official repatriation request for the artifacts, if they do, what does that process look like? What does it entail for them?

Mr. BUNCH. We have a very robust sense of repatriation. They will put a request in, the Smithsonian Museum of American History will look—Museum of American Indian will look at it. Will then sort of assess their basic questions.

Is it a federally sponsored tribe, etcetera. Once those questions are answered, then what we do is bring people back to Washington to look at the particular artifacts they are interested in and then make some final determination.

It is a process, but it is something that is fair and has worked very well with other tribes.

Senator FISCHER. Do you—and I assume your answer will be yes. Do you work with the tribes in looking at the facilities that need to be in place where these artifacts are going to be stored to make sure that they are going to be preserved in a manner that has to be adhered to? Then, do you help with funding for that? Do they need to handle that on their own? Where do we go on that?

Mr. BUNCH. What we do is we want to make sure that both the tribe is satisfied, but that the artifacts are preserved. Therefore, we look to see what facilities they have, what capability they have. There are times that we will give direction that would be very helpful to do this.

We unfortunately do not have the resources to actually help them. But I think the most important thing is to recognize that we want to be able to return what the communities really want, and that is really part of our goal.

Senator FISCHER. Right. I know the chairwoman and the council members, of course, they want to make sure that they are looking not just at the needs of their current generation of the tribe, but of the generations that these artifacts belong to.

To make sure that they adhere to their beliefs and principles, and then, of course, meet the conditions that you would put on them as well.

Mr. Secretary, I also understand that on March 24th, there was a food truck parked at 12th Street and Constitution Avenue in between the Smithsonian American History and the Natural History Museums. It caught fire. It was fully engulfed in flames when the firefighters arrived.

The photos that I have seen from that incident were very alarming, to say the least. Are these food trucks a regular safety concern for you?

Mr. BUNCH. You know, I understand the convenience of the food trucks. I understand how it is important within the City of Washington, DC for the business that these food trucks create.

But candidly, they really cause a problem for us because there are two levels of food trucks. There are those that have the permits, which really are in the right spots. Then those that just sort of take whatever spot they can.

It has become a problem on several levels. First of all, there is a problem of it really has impact on my staff if there are trash issues, they are taking care of the rodents issues. But also, the way that these trucks are parked is people then sort of take advantage

of the green space and there is a lot of damage to the property of the Smithsonian.

We are working with the City of Washington, DC, the National Park Service, and others. But I want to be candid, we have not resolved that yet. Luckily, the truck that burst on fire did not catch—did not affect any other trucks. The person was not severely hurt. But to me, it is a warning.

It is a warning that says that we want to be as fair as we can, but we have really got to protect the public and protect the Smithsonian.

Senator FISCHER. Well, let us know if we can do anything on that. I think it is a big problem. Your team recently completed 70 percent of the Smithsonian's Facilities Conditions Assessment Program using a new methodology designed to provide a more comprehensive assessment. What have you learned from that so far? What is the significance of the new data that has been compiled from it, please?

Mr. BUNCH. Well, it is part of my strategic sense of how we should address the deferred maintenance. Part of the issue for me was that we wanted to no longer look at deferred maintenance and capital as two different things.

To really think about strategically, how we put together those two entities so that, for example, when we did the National Air and Space Museum, we also took care of a lot of the backlog. Then the question was, do we have realistic numbers? We put together a new process that said to us, here are ways to look at valuation. Here are ways to understand and calculate inflation.

The numbers are now high, but it is not the fact that there are new problems. It really is that the numbers allow us have a more realistic way of doing it. Now what that allows me to do is to figure out where we should put our priorities based on what is the greatest need, and what is the greatest need that allows us to continue to serve the public as effectively as we can.

This has really been part of an overarching strategy that allows us to really sort of focus our resources, make the changes we want, and begin to deal with deferred maintenance. The reality is, for having buildings that have, you know, 29 million people that go through them for 364 days a year, deferred maintenance is probably one of the biggest challenges we face.

Senator FISCHER. Thank you.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Thank you very much, Senator Fischer. We are joined by Senator Warner, who is very eagerly awaiting the return of pandas to the Zoo from the great State of Virginia, right nearby.

Senator WARNER. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman. What you do not know, and Madam Ranking Member—

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Is that you are responsible for bringing back the pandas?

Senator WARNER. That is classified. I cannot share. That is classified.

[Laughter.]

Senator WARNER. But, you know, when I was—one of my mentors in the Senate was Chris Dodd. He said, “you know, one of the committees to get on is Rules, because not everybody knows that

Rules Committee actually has jurisdiction over the Smithsonian, which is obviously terribly important for the DMV.”

We are very proud of the fact that we have got a number of Smithsonian Institution’s kind of back office operations across the Commonwealth of Virginia. I am leaving an extraordinarily classified hearing, which I was chairing, to make sure I could come and do three things.

One, I want to commend you, Secretary Bunch, for—I think you are doing a great job. I am—you know, your history of the African American Museum. Now as overall Secretary of the Smithsonian. I have watched how you have, you know, taken on this challenge, worked with the community across the region, as well as across the country.

You know, we spent a lot of time here, up here criticizing folks, but I think, I wanted to come and say kudos and congratulations for, I think, a job well done and hopefully one that you will consider—continue for a long time, even though since I know most of your board and some of them are very difficult people to deal with. I will not get into names on that.

But I have a couple of questions. You know, fastest growing population in Virginia is first generation African diaspora. I think it may even be the same in Minnesota. While the African American Museum, you know, it is magnificent, it is mostly the story of descendants of slaves.

You know, as you think about the Smithsonian’s mission, you know, we have got 128,000, you know, extraordinary entrepreneurial—how do we build the ongoing stories of new diasporas that come, you know and my particular interest in this question is the African diaspora and how that is weaved into the Smithsonian’s story of America.

Mr. BUNCH. The African diaspora is so important, and it is really being addressed in three different parts of the Smithsonian.

The National Museum of African Art has really been taking the lead and working with these communities to sort of one, bring them into the fold, to be able to sort of look at the cultures of those communities and whether or not that is the kind of culture that gets collected in that museum.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture has actually now brought in two curators who just work on that area of the diaspora. They are reaching out, doing new kinds of exhibitions, online exhibitions that begin to build those relations.

Then the Museum of American History is really looking at how do we collect the local African diaspora community, so those collections are there. As you know, the key to the success of a museum is not necessarily what it is doing today, but what it plans for, for tomorrow.

I want to make sure that while we are doing programs with the community today, that we have the kind of collections that allow that story to be told in the future.

Senator WARNER. Did we tip you off on that question? That was a pretty good answer. I thought I was going to come at you and kind of like—kind of semi stump you.

[Laughter.]

Senator WARNER. Did you tip him off? Well, I—

[Laughter.]

Senator WARNER. Sound like a little—thought I was going to, got you—

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. This is not an Intel hearing.

[Laughter.]

Senator WARNER. Yes, this is a—I stand by my earlier statement. You are doing a good job because that is a pretty darn comprehensive answer. But I do think you have this—the constant remaking of the American story. I really hope, you know, make sure you were not thrown off. What are you doing on the on the South Asian diaspora?

Mr. BUNCH. Well, I think that again, we are seeing some attempt to do a better job of that. I think what I have asked is that through our educational committee community, to reach out, to begin to bring more involvement with these various communities.

I have to be honest, the National Museum of Asian Art is really spectacular in terms of being able to deal with local communities. They had a recent exhibition that looked at Southeast Asian art, and there was a variety of people coming from different communities.

Senator WARNER. Although I am chair of the India Caucus, I do think there is a unique contribution from South Asia separately, but I want to get my—

Mr. BUNCH. Right.

Senator WARNER. You know, I am glad you did not come back and say, I have got four points on that one the way that, you know. You know, and I do not think this issue has been raised, but I do—would like to get your thoughts. I mean, one of things we are all grappling with is AI.

You know, artificial intelligence as we—has enormous ability to enhance, but we can also embed biases. We also have to, I think, you know, think through, you know, do we actually have the notion of some kind of, in a better sense, walled garden around all of the intellectual property and images and parts of our history the Smithsonian protects.

Because, you know, just as deepfakes can manipulate our political process, you know, you could see AI tools at scale and speed manipulate our history and cultural in ways that could be frankly devastating. Talk to me about that.

Mr. BUNCH. You know, there is real challenges with AI. I mean, obviously, we want to make sure that we use it as an effective tool. But the biggest concern we have is the Smithsonian is a trusted source. That people know they can count on the Smithsonian.

Trying to really sort of do more than dip our toe, but understand how we can use AI and not lose that trusted source. Part of what we are doing as we move toward the 250th is we are taking some opportunities to test, to see, you know, if we can we make AI work for us.

For example, while we are already doing a lot with it, we are doing a lot in our astrophysical work, we are also using it to help us scrub all of our documents to understand if we are missing the history of women, for example, in a lot of the scientific discoveries.

But I think that we are really trying to figure out how not to be at the tip of the spear. We do not want to be at the end. We are

really trying to figure out how to make this work for us. I think we have to be involved. There have been—we have already been approached about, do you want to use Smithsonian content for machine learning and the like.

We are looking at a variety of opportunities. But the most important thing is I do not ever want to lose the trusted source. Right now, you cannot trust everything that happens with AI.

Senator WARNER. Thank you. While I have great, you know, respect for California, Minnesota, Nebraska, remember the 250th in many ways was—and regardless what those folks in Boston say, it is more Williamsburg. It is, you know, across the Commonwealth of Virginia and extraordinarily important. I will go back—

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. If you look at the artifacts over there, which include Nebraska—

Senator WARNER. I have got to go back to my classified hearing.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Are you aware of the virtual expansion of the Smithsonian?

Senator WARNER. I think it is wonderful. But if you want to see the real stuff, come to Virginia.

[Laughter.]

Senator WARNER. Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. All right. Very good. Next up, we have several new Members of the Committee. Senator Britt, who was here earlier. Senator Laphonza Butler who is here for 14 months, so she asks your questions really fast.

No, not really—because she has to get a lot done quickly. With that, I turn it over to Senator Butler of the State of California.

Senator BUTLER. Thank you, Chairwoman Klobuchar, Ranking Member Fischer. Secretary, thank you so much for coming. There are so many accolades, I am sure, that have been lauded onto you deservingly about your work here in Washington. But for an Angeleno, it all starts at camp.

Mr. BUNCH. Yes.

Senator BUTLER. Your contribution to generations of Angelenos teaching us about the history of our city, in the place that we belong, I think was just remarkable. All of the platitudes earned, but I want to make sure that even Washington, DC knows that California was where this started.

Hopefully—and they are continuing to see your leadership from Los Angeles. Thank you for your work and service and for being here. I do sort of move a little bit rapidly, so I am going to try to move around a couple of big topics pretty quickly in my time. The Chair has allotted us five minutes for questions, but you have said that there are, in your strategic plan, sort of five focus points.

You noted in your response to Senator Warner, the asset of the Smithsonian as a trusted source for the American people, and indeed, travelers around the world who want to understand the history of our country. You talk specifically about this trusted source as it relates to complex topics like social justice, like climate.

Here are two quick questions. Can you say a little bit about how you are working to ensure that Americans who are unable to visit DC can understand the Smithsonian as a trusted source?

I think some of what you are talking about relative to virtual exhibits could be responsive to that. But also, how you and your team

are telling the tough stories that are the truth around these complex issues in the story of our country.

Mr. BUNCH. Well, I think, first of all, what is really important for us is to use all the Smithsonian assets to make sure the country reaps the benefit of the Smithsonian. While a lot of is virtual, also it is our traveling exhibitions.

The other thing we do is we do a lot of programs with students that we bring students in from wherever they are into Washington. We basically really have, as in our DNA, the recognition that we are more about outside of Washington then we are inside of Washington. Now, the second question is this real issue of the difficult issues.

I have really felt that that is really the Smithsonian's job. That at a time when you need clarity, at a time when there is a debate, you want the Smithsonian to sort of bring its scholarship, bring its perspective to help people grapple with these issues.

When I built the African American Museum, the real key was to make sure that I was not trying to sort of point fingers or guilt. What I was trying to do is say, here is a way we understand ourselves by looking at this complexity.

I would argue whether it is climate change, whether it is issues of social justice, that the Smithsonian, because it has art, history, culture, science can really bring our expertise to bear. But what we also do is want to recognize that we do not want to sort of get into controversy for controversy sake.

But we also recognize that if you are going to tell history or science, controversy is there, so we will not run away from it. All I ask from my colleagues is, let's think very carefully about what we do.

Let's make sure it is always about driven by scholarship, and then let's make sure it is always about the greater good. To make sure that this is about how the Smithsonian is this reservoir of understanding and a reservoir of hope. If we can continue to do that, we can help the country move forward.

Senator BUTLER. I love that reservoir of hope. My last question, just in the spirit of time, I know you talked a good deal already about the two new museums and the waiver that is necessary from Congress. Talk to us about the consequences of that waiver not being granted.

Mr. BUNCH. In some ways, if the waiver is granted but it is two years down the road, what it really means is that you are 15 or 20 years away from an actual museum being built. Right now there is attention focused on these museums.

There is fundraising. But if people feel that it is stalled, there is going to be less sort of attention and excitement to it. Now, candidly, if the waiver is not granted, then the question is I am not sure.

Because we have looked at so many sites, and there are sites that just say to you, knock down a building and move a whole department of x. I do not know if—I do not think you can do that. Right now I am committed and focused to working with people like Senator Klobuchar to make sure that we can get a waiver.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. One other thing I would add is doing it sooner rather than later means that you are still the Secretary

for when we get started on this. Then we will require you to stay 15 years.

But I think that would be helpful to have a seasoned leader there when we get—at least to get this off the ground, as you did with the African American Museum. You went a lot further with that, as we know, with the 10 millionth visitor just having visited there. That is another appealing thing, which I think you have a lot of support on both sides of the aisle to move this forward in a good way and the trust of the Regents.

I was going to—the question I was asked—I want to just air for maybe my constituents next to the pandas, they would like to know about the Air and Space Museum and what you are doing there. Could you give us some details on that. What is happening with that renovation?

Mr. BUNCH. Well, you know, as somebody who started at the Air and Space Museum in my career, it is what I really care a lot about. What I am pleased is, is to say, look at how the Air and Space has changed already.

The new exhibitions that we opened in 2022, the public cannot get enough of them. They are really—what is powerful is while they are rife with stories of aviation, they are also rife with technology and rife with education.

They are really accessible. Then I think that what is also happening is that—Udvar-Hazy out in Dulles is really getting more and more visitors because of the large numbers of airplanes and the work we are doing out there.

But I think what excites me in some ways about Air and Space is that we also have this new Bezos Learning Center that is going to be a part of it. What that really is, it gives the Smithsonian opportunity to really do STEM and STEAM.

Yes, about aviation, but it is about the Smithsonian writ large. It allows us to serve more students from around the country to come to Washington. The Air and Space Museum and where we are is, thanks to your support, the federal transformation is now done.

Now, over the next two years, we will use private money to build, rebuild, and open the new exhibitions. That, as I said, by the time we get to 2026, the whole Air and Space Museum will be open, and Udvar-Hazy will then be the place that even the larger parts of aviation history.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Very good. Just one of the things you mentioned. I know, previously, the Smithsonian's effort to protect collections most vulnerable to deterioration and damage. We have certainly seen other parts of the country when they are not protected or they are not in a safe place, including preparing staff to rescue collections in an emergency. Could you talk about what is going on with the management of those vulnerable collections?

Mr. BUNCH. Preserving the collections of the Smithsonian is one of the key priorities of any Secretary. Those 155 million artifacts are really not artifacts of nostalgia, but artifacts of scholarship, artifacts of understanding, artifacts of effective use.

What we have done is we have actually had a major look over the last three or four years at how do we sort of improve our collection storage. How do we also make sure that vulnerable collections are protected?

For example, when we built the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the goal was to really build everything in there to handle flooding and climate change issues. Now, we are looking to make sure we do that at the American History Museum. We are looking at where we are most vulnerable, how to make those changes.

In our fiscal year 2025 budget request, we request resources that would allow us to bring, you know, slurry walls and dams and pumps to the air into the American History Museum. Basically, what we have done is we realized that we have to do this on several levels.

One is address climate change and the possibility of the flooding. We are looking at that. Two, training staff. We have staff who are trained just to handle any kind of emergency. We have already moved the most vulnerable collections away from the lower levels so that as we are doing everything we can to make sure that we are prepared when the inevitable happens.

That as we can continue then to put the resources into addressing the challenge of climate change, we can protect the institute, the museums we need to. The good thing, for example, about the space is where we are looking for the new museums, they are not in spaces of where they are at risk.

While we may do things to make sure that they can handle the water, it is really the museums that are on the Constitution Avenue side that are really most at risk, and that is what we are focusing on.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Okay. One last question. My favorite museum to visit is the Portrait Gallery. Maybe because it is not all portraits, but my favorite exhibit ever was, People Who Remained Cool Through Time, which included two Minnesotans, Bob Dylan and Prince. Just how is that museum doing?

Mr. BUNCH. The Portrait Gallery was the first Smithsonian Museum I ever visited when I came here to go to college. It is something that is really important because, as you have said, it is portraiture, but it is more than that.

It is rich history. It is popular culture. They are doing very well. Kim Sajet, the Director, has really sort of redefined notions of portraiture and have really brought in people from around the country to give it the kind of financial resources it needs to do wonderful things.

The Portrait Gallery, and its sister institution, the Smithsonian American Art Museum are doing very well. They have become a destination for many younger Americans who come to Washington because they are one of the few Smithsonian that is open late.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Very interesting. With that, any other questions, Senator Fischer?

Senator FISCHER. Yes. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman. Just a couple here. I am a cattle rancher, and I also sit on the AG Committee, along with the Chairwoman of Rules, and I was encouraged to see the Smithsonian partner with 4-H last summer as part of the Rural Initiative.

Can you tell us a little bit about the Rural Initiative, but also then how has the 4-H partnership gone so far?

Mr. BUNCH. I really felt that the Smithsonian does a lot of work in urban communities, but that it is rural and smaller communities that need our attention. I wanted to build on work we have done, the Museum on Main Street model of bringing the Smithsonian to small towns, to shopping malls, to where—is really brilliant.

But what I wanted was to be more systematic and strategic. What I did with the Rural Initiative is that we have actually had people going around the country to find out what the needs are, and to find out how it is less about the Smithsonian coming to rural America and more about a partnership that allows the Smithsonian to be made better by understanding what are the issues that rural communities need.

For us, it is—the 4-H club has been really powerful because the 4-H clubs have, as you know, deep relationships around the country and they have got amazing programs that we are able to leverage.

The notion of being able to create dialogs around democracy, to use the 4-H clubs to really help young Americans not just look at the history of democracy, but understand their obligation, their responsibility to sort of protect the democracy has been really very moving.

Last summer we brought 700 students through the 4-H clubs to the Smithsonian. They spent time at each of the museums. They worked with curators. What I realized is that this is what the Smithsonian does well, to give people a way to sort of find wonder, to find new ways to think about their future, and new ways to think about their community.

With the 4-H clubs, while we are doing, I think, important work, I think we are also changing the Smithsonian.

Senator FISCHER. Thank you. One last question. As we look at leadership for the new museums, what is the process for candidate selection, and how does the Smithsonian work with a search firm, for example, to find and select a candidate?

Mr. BUNCH. Running a cultural institution is hard work. Running a conservatorship in the Smithsonian is unbelievably challenging. Part of what we do is we look at this through several lenses.

One, we try to hire important consulting firms that can help tease out candidates, but also we reach out. I reached out very directly around the Women's History Museum to people that I thought were the kind of either the leaders or the next generation of leaders that would sort of help the Smithsonian move forward.

The process then is, you know, once we get a pool, we make sure that they spend time not just with sort of senior leadership, but with other museum directors, so they can understand the challenge of the Smithsonian. Because, quite candidly, when you run a museum that is not the Smithsonian, you really are the CEO.

At the Smithsonian, you run a museum, you are a mid-level manager, right. You have got other people on top of you. Basically, we want people to understand the challenge of being a director at the Smithsonian.

But then what we do is after they go through the process, I get to speak to the final two candidates and really ask them questions to guide my sense that they can embrace the ambiguity of leader-

ship, especially if you are building new museums. If they understand the challenge of bureaucracy, and if they have a vision.

Because basically, to build a new museum, you have got to have a vision that you believe in that can carry you for a decade.

Senator FISCHER. I know there was a situation in the past on a director for a new museum—and I hope this new process, or a more complete process can be followed in the future.

Mr. BUNCH. We wanted to make sure that instead of just counting on a search firm to vet a candidate, we also have our own private way of doing that.

We make sure that even after a search firm may say this is a strong candidate, we have a process that allows us to sort of vet it even further and to make sure that there are no surprises, because I hate being surprised.

Senator FISCHER. Me too. Thank you, Secretary.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Did you have any additional questions, Senator Butler?

Senator BUTLER. I am happy to ask if I am given extra time, Chairwoman.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Yes, yes.

Senator BUTLER. Thank you so much, I appreciate it. Secretary, what are you—there is a lot of sort of criticism, conjecture, sort of being laid upon this—the sort of newer generations of Millennials, Gen Zs, call them Gen Y, call them whatever you want.

I am curious about your ability, the institution's ability to analyze data, relative to who are the participants in—across all the platforms of the Smithsonian, in person, virtual, traveling exhibits, partnerships and what do—if you have the capacity to examine and analyze that data, what are the trends that we are seeing relative to future generations being interested in the story of this country?

What are you doing about those trends? There is a lot of ifs, but I have some great curiosities as to how do we continue the legacy and tradition of this trusted source—

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Says the mother of a nine-year old.

Senator BUTLER. Says the mother of a nine-year old who cannot get her daughter to finish the African American Museum. We have been three times.

[Laughter.]

Mr. BUNCH. I think, first of all, it is crucial that the Smithsonian has data. We really sort of look at who comes, who participates in programs, who we are looking at virtually. In some ways, the technology has allowed us to capture something we could not capture in the past. We now have a much stronger idea.

But also, what we find is that we have shaped programs to different parts of our community, Gen X, Gen Z, to make sure that we are asking the questions they want to ask. What I find fascinating has been that when we are often building a museum, people say, well, you know, these younger generations, they want the virtual.

What they want is to realize that they have never seen the actual and that we use the virtual to get them into the actual, and that really works. We have many, many more people that are grappling with it. I think the other thing that is so important that the

Smithsonian is trying to do with these different generations is really shape the educational community.

We are doing a lot of work. I created Under Secretary for Education for the first time. We are doing a lot of work in different communities to make sure that younger Americans understand the power of history, the importance of science, the joy of the creativity of art, so we see sort of millions of young Americans engaging in the Smithsonian besides that trip in eighth grade.

Senator BUTLER. That is super helpful. That is one of the things really what I was trying to get at. Senator Klobuchar really noted the point that I view most of, if not everything, through a lens of one, urgency because of my short time in the Senate, but also through the lens of being a parent.

You know, as I offer the story in jest in terms of my daughter and the African American Museum, but does the data, do the learnings offer you anything relative to footprint of new museums?

One of the things that my nine-year old says, take it for what it is worth, the science that it is worth, "it is too big, mama." I just want to do this little part. Does the data give you any insight or any learnings across the industry and field, give you any insight relative to what is the right footprint for as we think about new museums, particularly as we are grappling with the complexity of space and climate and all of those things, as well as the attention of a nine-year old?

Mr. BUNCH. I think what we found through the data is that the museum needs to be compartmentalized. That regardless of the footprint, you really want to be able to sort of not have people try to do the entire experience.

Really trying to do pieces of it. I think that is something that will shape as we are building the new museum. I think the other thing is that to really—we are actually using a lot of child psychologists and others to help us think about, all right, what is the best level to engage?

Because as you know, in a museum, you are engaging a whole array of people. We are looking at, do we use technology even differently. Do we really craft opportunities that this really works for sixth graders, this technology, this—and so, we are looking at what are all the possibilities.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Very good. Good questions. Thank you very much, Senator Butler. I was thinking you will have to come to Minnesota, Secretary Bunch, and see the country's biggest state fair for your own cultural experience.

Mr. BUNCH. Absolutely.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. We do not count Texas because they are open 30 days. It is—there is a huge 4-H presence. I was thinking about that since you have worked with them. Then you could see the butter carving and think of it, of the Princess Kay and the Milky Way out of huge butter bus that go in a revolving refrigerator, and you could think of that as a future exhibit.

Mr. BUNCH. You are broadening my cultural horizons.

Chairwoman KLOBUCHAR. Yes, exactly. That would be a lot of fun. We have some great museums there, as you well know. I want to thank Senator Fischer and the Members of the Committee for a productive hearing.

As well as you, Secretary, for your testimony on the ongoing work of the Smithsonian. Your vision for the future, both for the existing collection and then all the exciting new work going on with the two museums. I meant what I said, this is our moment, near the end of the year, to allow you to get these things launched. I look forward to continuing my work with my colleagues to support the important work of the Smithsonian.

The hearing record will remain open for a week. Do you want to add anything, Senator Fischer? Okay, good. We are adjourned. We are going to look at those artifacts. Thank you.

Mr. BUNCH. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 3:53 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

## **APPENDIX MATERIAL SUBMITTED**

**Statement of Lonnie G. Bunch III, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution  
United States Senate  
Committee on Rules and Administration  
Tuesday, June 18, 2024**

Good afternoon. Chairwoman Klobuchar, Ranking Member Fischer, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

It has been a couple of years since I last met with you. In that time, the Smithsonian has seen approximately 34 million in-person visits to our museums, education centers, and research facilities. We have become an increasingly digital institution, seeking out partners to implement technology smartly and safely so we can bring the vast resources of the Smithsonian to people everywhere. And with the help of Congress, some of our renowned buildings like the Castle and the National Air and Space Museum have been undergoing substantial and needed renovations.

This enduring institution has meant so much to the American people and the citizens of the world for nearly 178 years. It is nearly impossible to adequately describe all we do—from protecting cultural heritage in war-torn nations to helping people explore their genealogy to examining the surface of Mars. We engage with and educate people on important topics like the essence of the American experience, the diversity of the world’s cultures, the sustainability of the planet, and the nature of the universe. We are at the center of the civic, educational, scientific, and artistic life of the nation, and our international reach to more than 100 countries includes robust research, programs, partnerships, and knowledge exchanges. Finally, we are responsible for the safety and security of more than 6,500 employees, more than 3,800 on-site volunteers, and millions of annual visitors to our free museums.

My vision for the Smithsonian’s future is to be a reservoir of knowledge anyone can dip into at any time and any place. It is embodied in the way we have expanded our educational reach, with a presence in every state in the nation and dozens of countries worldwide. In fiscal year 2023, more than 620,000 educators and students used resources on our Smithsonian Learning Lab portal, and nearly 3 million students used our Smithsonian Science for the Classroom curriculum.

We also see a glimpse of the Smithsonian’s future in our two new Congressionally authorized museums, the Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum and the National Museum of the American Latino. Not only will they help us tell a more robust, expansive, and inclusive version of the American story that truly reflects our institutional values, but they will also be built as digital-first museums. Their programming has already begun reaching audiences well before the first concrete is poured for either foundation.

Building new museums requires a massive outlay of money, as do all other needs inherent in such a vast institution, from addressing deferred maintenance to meeting increased salary requirements. We increase our reach and impact by collaborating with other organizations,

agencies, non-profits, and governments whose goals and values align with ours. We rely heavily on the generosity of donors and the public who value what we do and support our work, and we are grateful for the past three years of record-breaking philanthropy. And of course, the U.S. Congress remains our most valuable partner. We take our fiscal responsibility seriously and look to spend taxpayer dollars conscientiously and in a way that maximizes our reach and impact.

Our strategic plan lays out bold goals for the Smithsonian's future. Our actions over the past few years reflect those goals: to be more digital in the way we reach the American people, to be nimbler and more effective in our operations, to elevate our scientific endeavors, to expand our educational efforts, and to be a more trusted source than ever. This will be foundational to my goal of reaching every home and being in every classroom across our nation.

The nation's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2026 will be a pivotal moment for us to unveil just how much progress we have made. It will serve as a celebration of what we have been, but also give a glimpse into all we can be. We plan to activate the National Mall with a vibrant cultural festival, and the renovated National Air and Space Museum should be fully open to the public in time for the commemoration. I have asked my colleagues to work toward temporarily opening the Castle to the public for the celebration as well.

To coincide with that milestone, we will have programming that both celebrates and contemplates who we are as a nation and the Smithsonian's place in it. We will invite Americans to explore all corners of our complex histories and find ways to have honest conversations that transcend our differences and connect our shared humanity. It will be an opportunity for us to showcase the myriad ways in which the Smithsonian is becoming nimbler, more relevant, and more effective.

Our venerable institution is undergoing a transformation. Like any such moment, it is filled with challenges. But I would argue that, more than anything, it is a moment of opportunity to truly exemplify the vision of our founder, James Smithson. Decades before it was built, he foresaw an institution that would be a gift to the American people.

Recently, a couple of announcements highlighted the Smithsonian's global reach and impact. The first, of course, is that we were able to secure the return of the Giant Pandas to the National Zoo by the end of the year. It is the result of a lot of hard work behind the scenes. I am excited our visitors will be able to enjoy them again and that our researchers will help them thrive in the years to come.

The other is less cute and cuddly, but just as important. A team led by the Smithsonian and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration created the National Ocean Biodiversity Strategy released by the National Science and Technology Council, a vital plan for ocean conservation. It is the first nationwide strategy to improve scientists' ability to gather and share knowledge so we can protect the critical biodiversity on which we all rely for our food supply and economic vitality.

Both speak to our ability to work collaboratively, to think creatively, and to act decisively to help find solutions to some of the world's biggest challenges. I am more confident than ever that the Smithsonian is uniquely positioned to do so.

Thank you for holding this hearing, for your ongoing support, and for your commitment to working with us. I am happy to answer any questions you have.

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**Senate Committee on Rules and Administration**  
Oversight of the Smithsonian Institution  
June 18, 2024  
Questions for the Record  
**Secretary Lonnie G. Bunch III**

**Chairwoman Klobuchar**

**During the hearing you noted that the Smithsonian works with other federal agencies to strengthen its impact and maximize the use of federal resources. Can you expand on how these partnerships help the Smithsonian better serve the public and how combining resources improves the success of important research programs?**

From its earliest days, the Smithsonian has partnered with the federal government and its agencies to advance our scientific understanding of the natural world through exploration, research, and the development of an unprecedented collection of more than 148 million objects and specimens that trace the origins and evolution of our planet and all that has inhabited it.

As one example, the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) collaborates with multiple federal agencies whose missions have collection-based research components. Through partnerships that leverage this vital infrastructure to better serve the public, the Smithsonian ensures proper curation, preservation, and availability for research in perpetuity.

NMNH partners with staff from multiple federal agencies, including the EPA, NSF, NASA, and the Departments of Defense, Agriculture, Interior, Transportation, and Commerce. In some cases, these relationships have been in place for more than a century. These partnerships represent critical collaborators to the mission of the NMNH, yet they vary in their depth and integration. Some of these partners have a resident or embedded presence at NMNH as affiliated agencies. Our association with these federal agencies has been highly productive at leveraging support for research and collections endeavors.

The federal affiliated agencies spend millions of dollars annually on activities associated with the national collections, representing a cost-share to NMNH. These benefits include:

- Sharing the overall cost of maintaining the national collection and making it available to various user communities. Three of these agencies continue to make large personnel commitments to collections management.
- Yielding a high quality, relevant national collection through, over the long term, the diversity of interests, contacts, and funding sources.
- Creating a significant "critical mass" in systematics expertise – collectively we have the largest group of systematists anywhere in the world.
- Strengthening our overall goals in research, collections management, professional training, and national service. Synergies develop by close association of staff and collections which could not occur in other settings, making NMNH a major center

of collections-based research and training, and enhancing our leadership position worldwide.

- Supporting collections management, including hosting visitors.
- Facilitating direct investment in collections, storage equipment, and research equipment.

Of most significance, our collections are used daily in collaboration with our federal partners to meet important public health and safety needs and to protect the economic interests of the United States. Examples include:

- NMNH Entomology and Botany Departments work with embedded and offsite teams from the USDA-Animal & Plant Inspection Service (APHIS) to identify potential invasive species at ports of entry.
- Through agreements with the Department of Defense and the Federal Aviation Administration, the museum's National Feather Identification Laboratory processes thousands of samples a year to identify birds that have struck military, commercial and private aircraft. This enables airfields to mitigate future collisions and has been critical to engineering and design of aircraft engines to withstand bird strikes.
- NMNH partners with and is home to the Army's Walter Reed Biosystematics Unit which uses our collection for the identification of arthropods — primarily mosquitoes, ticks, and sand flies — that can transmit diseases to soldiers and civilians. These collections support epidemiological studies and disease control strategies important to the military.
- The Smithsonian and NOAA have been working in partnership for decades and have recently signed a new memorandum of understanding to advance collaborative efforts to understand and conserve the biodiversity of the world's ocean ecosystems and support the blue economy. The NOAA National Systematics Laboratory is physically located at the National Museum of Natural History and is fundamental to this effort.

**Your written testimony highlighted the Smithsonian's work with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to create the National Ocean Biodiversity Strategy that was released in June to outline a plan for the conservation of our oceans, which are critical for both biodiversity and our economy.**

**What can you tell us about the Smithsonian's contributions to the development of the strategy and its ongoing implementation?**

The National Ocean Biodiversity Strategy was drafted by an Interagency Writing Team co-chaired by Emmett Duffy from Smithsonian's Marine Global Earth Observatory (GEO) and Gabrielle Canonico from NOAA and including members from eight federal agencies. The Smithsonian and NOAA co-chairs are now leading a process with agency partners to develop an implementation plan for the Strategy and are also planning convenings with interested parties outside the federal government to raise awareness, solicit input, and explore potential contributions from outside government to advance the Strategy's goals. More broadly,

Smithsonian is an active member of the inter-agency Subcommittee on Ocean Science and Technology (SOST) of the National Science and Technology Council, and the Interagency Working Group on Biodiversity, which is expected to be centrally involved in organizing coordinated federal implementation of the Strategy.

The Smithsonian Environmental Research Center (SERC) provides several other examples of very active cooperation with federal agencies. As designated by the National Invasive Species Act of 1996, SERC's Marine Invasive Species Program works closely with the U.S. Coast Guard to track management of ballast water discharged by commercial ships arriving to all U.S. ports. Ballast water is a major vector for moving non-indigenous species as plankton across oceans and among ports. Every commercial ship arriving to every U.S. port is required to report its ballast water management practices to SERC, which in turn reports to Congress every two years. SERC maintains the publicly available data base on the occurrence, distribution, and ecology of marine invasive species for all U.S. coastal ecosystems, including the Great Lakes. SERC works as an ex-officio member of the Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force led by U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to help manage spread of introduced species by other vectors. As another example of cooperation, SERC has worked closely with the Department of Energy for nearly 40 years on the ecosystem effects of climate change, especially rising levels greenhouse gases on coastal marshes and effects of flooding of coastal forests. SERC works collaboratively with NOAA to create and maintain the Coastal Carbon Atlas as a national and global database for "blue carbon ecosystems" (salt marshes, mangroves, sea grasses) that mitigate climate change by storing 50 percent of the carbon in the oceans. SERC also works closely with NOAA on mid-Atlantic fisheries to manage data on migratory patterns of coastal and estuarine fishes, and to evaluate restoration of oyster reefs.

#### **Senator Fischer**

##### Smithsonian Facilities:

**The Smithsonian has been designing a joint collection storage project with the National Gallery of Art at its Museum Support Center in Maryland, commonly referred to as 'Pod 6'. The Smithsonian and the National Gallery have presented this project as a much needed, cost-effective first step in addressing existing collection storage challenges. Would you update us on the project's status?**

The Museum Support Center, Pod 6 facility substantial completion is planned for January 2025. The National Gallery of Art collections are scheduled to move to Pod 6 starting in April 2025. The Smithsonian collections move is planned for FY25 and FY26.

**What is next in the Smithsonian's strategy to ensure collection storage meets appropriate standards?**

As the world's largest museum, education, and research complex, the Smithsonian is entrusted with vast collections, which are vital to connecting the past, present, and future. In 2015, the

Smithsonian Institution produced the Collections Space Framework Plan, a comprehensive, inclusive, Smithsonian-wide project aimed at safeguarding the Institution's remarkable collections for current and future generations. We continue to implement the 2015 Collections Space Framework Plan recommendations as appropriated resources allow. Highlighted below are some of the projects, in various phases of development, identified in the Plan:

1. Decontamination and removal of hazardous material at Garber Buildings 15, 16, 18 and renovation of Building 37 to serve as a temporary swing space.
2. Construction of a new storage module Dulles Collection Center 2 adjacent to the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center.
3. Renovation of the National Museum of American History Objects Processing Facility at the NMAH Mall Building.
4. Continue implementation of the Suitland Collections Center master plan and complete the Dulles Collection Center master plan to address the Smithsonian's intermediate and long-term collections space needs.

**The Smithsonian recently started an ambitious revitalization of its Historic Core, which includes the Smithsonian's Castle and the Arts and Industries Building. I understand this is the first time the Smithsonian Castle has seen a major renovation since 1968. Why is this project significant, and what will its completion mean for the deferred maintenance backlog?**

The Smithsonian Institution Building, affectionately known as the "Smithsonian Castle," is the Institution's first home and its symbolic heart. Revitalization of this iconic building will provide efficient and accessible spaces for visitors and staff. The building's roof and windows will be replaced, and the stone exterior will be refurbished. Public spaces will be restored after years of piecemeal remodeling that has diminished original proportions and appearance. The Castle carries an estimated deferred maintenance backlog of \$137 million or 4.4% of the Smithsonian's total backlog. The completed project will significantly reduce the building's backlog, but it will have a much lesser effect on the overall Smithsonian wide backlog.

**The Arts and Industries Building's iconic exterior was renovated from 2010 to 2014. What work remains for the building's interior as part of the Historic Core revitalization?**

Due to budgetary constraints, the Historic Core revitalization project focuses solely on the Smithsonian Castle. The Arts and Industries Building is no longer included in the Historic Core revitalization project, currently underway.

**What is the building being used for while it awaits internal revitalization?**

The Arts and Industries Building is currently being used as a venue for special events. AIB has also served as an exhibit “pop-up” location for various programs over the years, such as FUTURES, Smithsonian’s Folklife festival, Summer Solstice, and private rentals.

**What is the Smithsonian’s plan for the building following the renovation of its interior?**

In the short-term it will be the Smithsonian’s headquarters for the Semi-quincentennial (US 250) in 2026. Planning for long-term use of the Arts and Industries Building is still under development.

**New Museum Site Selection and Development Progress:**

**The current sites that were proposed by the Board of Regents for the National Museum of the American Latino and the Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum are both located in the Reserve, which as you know, would violate current law. What is the Board’s plan to identify alternate sites that would not require Congress to change the law? Can you tell the Committee about those efforts?**

After an 18-month site-selection process guided by legislation that directed the Smithsonian to analyze various sites including some within the Reserve, the Smithsonian identified two optimal sites, known as the *South Monument site* and the *Tidal Basin site*. The extensive site selection analysis took several factors into account, such as transportation, location, existing site conditions, environmental factors, and costs. In addition, the Smithsonian engaged advocates, supporters, donors, and the boards of both museums. Stakeholders for both museums expressed significant support for the optimal sites. Museum supporters stressed their desire and commitment to seeing both museums on the National Mall, in newly constructed buildings that allow for symbolic and architectural expression that is meaningful to their identities.

Throughout the site selection process, the Smithsonian remained open to examining sites beyond what was directed by legislation. The Smithsonian added a few sites for review based on feedback from varying stakeholders. Now that the process is complete, adding new sites would require the Smithsonian to re-open the site selection process, an expensive and time-consuming endeavor. However, while we believe that these two sites have the greatest potential to meet the needs of the two new museums, the Smithsonian would, of course, respond to any legislative direction it receives.

At this time, the Smithsonian is focused on finding a path forward to secure the optimal sites identified by our Board of Regents.

**The selection of a permanent location for both museums is key to their development and construction. Can you speak to the other efforts to build collections and content for these buildings?**

While the museums do not have physical locations yet, they are focused on developing content and telling the stories of women and Latinos in America. Earlier this year, the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum (SAWHM) launched its first digital exhibition, *Becoming Visible*. The exhibit brings to life the stories of lesser-known women like Elizabeth Keckly, designer of Mary Todd Lincoln's favorite gown and Dr. Isabel Morgan, a scientist that played a key role in Polio research. The National Museum of the American Latino (NMAL) is currently in the production phase of its second full exhibition, *¡Puro Ritmo! The Musical Journey of Salsa*, which will open in March 2026. NMAL has visited 30 cities and 23 states to listen to communities and learn about what they would like to see in the future Museum and is also digitizing objects to create a publicly viewable online gallery by 2026. Both museums have started to develop their strategy for a future national collection.

**As the founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, you have a unique perspective on establishing new museums. Can you walk the Committee through the general timeline of building and developing two new museums, and how long the process will take?**

Planning, programming, designing, and constructing world class museums requires a high level of thoroughness and significant stakeholder involvement. As such, it is a deliberate and time intensive process. The selection of the museum site is especially important and significantly impacts the final programming and architectural design of the building. However, prior to site selection there are opportunities to advance the schedule and minimize delays. Fund raising is a critical aspect to secure funds for collections acquisition/conservation, architectural design, and construction. Community consultation and preliminary programming is required to develop the Institution's broader program goals so that they can be communicated to the final exhibit and architectural designer. In addition, design and construction of the off-site collections' storage facilities, if located on Smithsonian property, can begin.

Once the museum sites are identified, selection of the final exhibit and architectural designer can begin. For design competitions this process can take a year or more. It is important for both the exhibit design and the architectural design to inform each other. It is much preferred to design the building around the collection rather than limit the collection to facility constraints. During the design phase, there will be significant stakeholder involvement with reviews and presentations to all the cognizant review agencies, in addition to public comment periods. This process will take several years. Once the designs are completed and approved, the procurement of exhibit fabrication and building construction will begin. Procurement will take up to a year for large complex projects such as these. Actual building construction and exhibit fabrication will take several years. Once building construction is complete, there may be a year to carefully move and install collections into the exhibits. Overall, the entire process can take up to ten years.

**How much of this work can be done while the Board is still working through the site selection process? What kind of delays could a prolonged site selection process cause?**

The selection of a site is one of the most consequential decisions an organization will make. The site determines and impacts many aspects including the timeline and development of the museum. The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) was built in 10 years, from site selection in January 2006 to opening day in September 2016.

- **NMAAHC Timeline:**
  - December 2003- NMAAHC sites offered in enabling legislation, including Monument site.
  - January 2006- After site-selection study is completed, the Smithsonian Board of Regents selects the Monument site.
  - February 2012- Official groundbreaking
  - September 2016- Museum opens.
- **Fundraising:** Once a site is announced, donors and supporters are more likely to be inspired to commit financially to a museum. The idea of a future museum becomes real and tangible. Absence of a site or a prolonged site selection process has the potential to impact fundraising momentum and can create doubt in the minds of donors and supporters.
- **Costs:** Once a site is determined, a museum director will have a better understanding of potential costs and necessary funding. For example, the costs of building new construction from the ground up could be less than the costs of acquiring an existing building. An existing building might require additional costs, for legal fees, acquisition, relocation of occupants, adaptive re-use designs, demolition, and escalation for construction costs.
- **Collections:** A delay in site-selection can impact collections because museum curators cannot acquire significant artifacts and objects without the necessary and adequate storage. Most objects and artifacts for NMAAHC were donated and collected during the years that the museum was being built. The reality of a forthcoming museum and the ability to demonstrate public progress by sharing renderings, images and photos of the museum encouraged supporters to donate items and enriched the starting collection. Thus far, both museums have had little to no acquisitions partly due to the lack of a site and collection storage space.

Early strategic thinking in terms of defining the museum organization, programming, exhibition and collections philosophy can precede site selection. In the absence of a defined site, museum programming, planning, and design activities are limited to the general and abstract.

While the museums await sites, we continue to move forward. Thus far, the museums have raised more than \$65 million dollars each. Both museums have established boards, hired directors and key staff, and developed content and programming.