IN REPLY REFER TO:
NCPC File No. 8327-8328

September 15, 2022

Lonnie G. Bunch, III
Secretary of the Smithsonian
Smithsonian Institution Building
1000 Jefferson Drive, SW
Washington, DC 20560

Re: New Smithsonian Museums Site Selection

Dear Secretary Bunch:

In response to your correspondence dated August 8, 2022 and the relevant enabling legislation establishing the Smithsonian’s new National Museum of the American Latino and the Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum, please accept this letter of comments and considerations regarding the potential museum sites. I understand this letter will be provided to the Board of Regents as part of a final report in advance of their site selection decisions.

On behalf of the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC), I would like to express our unwavering support for these two new museums. As I have mentioned previously, the story on the National Mall is incomplete. These national museums will reflect populations that are significantly under-represented in Washington’s commemorative landscape, and the Commission is excited that these stories can now be told among the many others in our nation’s capital.

I would also like to thank you and your staff for coordinating with NCPC over the last year. The Commission received four briefings from the Smithsonian staff and consultant team, and they have worked closely with NCPC to provide information and answer questions during this important process. The Commission looks forward to further engagement after site selection. As you are aware, NCPC will have an important role in reviewing the planning and design of these new museums.

Focus Sites

NCPC recognizes that a National Mall location is a very high priority for both museums as shown with the four focus sites. We greatly understand the importance of representation on the Mall as it is the primary place where we commemorate as a nation. Unfortunately, there are so few opportunities left on the National Mall to site a new museum, let alone two. The four focus sites each have their own set of challenges,
especially the South Monument and Tidal Basin sites, both of which are located within the Reserve. The South Monument site is simply not big enough to accommodate a museum with the necessary program without challenging design and operational issues. The Tidal Basin site has always remained open space since the earliest of plans for Washington, DC, to maintain views within the primary north-south vista extending from the White House to the Jefferson Memorial. At the same time, there is great potential in the Arts and Industries Building and the Northwest Capitol site. Both have exceptional locations and would fit the desired programs if each site’s challenges can be overcome (which seems possible). It would be wonderful to have a permanent use in the Arts and Industries Building, which has been so beautifully restored. A museum in the foreground of the U.S. Capitol at the Northwest Capitol site would be very symbolic and would add vibrancy to Pennsylvania Avenue and the east end of the National Mall. Please see the attached Appendix A for a full summary of the Commission’s comments on the four focus sites.

Another Approach

While the four focus sites are the Smithsonian’s current priority, each site brings its own set of challenges. It is therefore important to keep other options on the table. If these site constraints are ultimately found to be insurmountable, or if the underlying jurisdiction cannot be transferred to the Smithsonian, another approach should be considered. NCPC, in coordination with federal and District partners, has done considerable planning in anticipation of the moment when the National Mall can no longer accommodate additional development, no matter how important it might be. Unfortunately, that time is rapidly approaching, and we must consider the opportunity to expand the experience and symbolism found on the National Mall to accommodate the diversity of American stories, and to avoid shutting the door on other voices not yet in the site selection process. The great cross axis of the National Mall is distinguished by carefully planned open spaces and symbolic views. These green spaces are not “undeveloped.” Instead, they provide views, gathering spaces, and landscapes fundamental to the visitor experience of our democratic capital. Our task is to be stewards of this space while finding ways to expand and add to the stories represented in our nation's capital.

During this unique moment in history, with three museums on the horizon and a potential contraction of federal office space, the Smithsonian should consider opportunities on Independence Avenue and 10th Street, SW which are already home to several museums in addition to the Smithsonian Castle and Haupt Garden. A powerful example is the potential expansion of the Smithsonian South Mall Campus to include

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1 The “No-Build Zone” on the National Mall established by Congress through the Comemorative Works Act.

2 The National Museum of the American Latino, the American Women’s History Museum and the proposed National Museum of Asian Pacific American History and Culture, recently authorized for study.
the U.S. Department of Energy site (Forrestal Building and surroundings), which is located immediately south of the Castle. Cleared and repurposed, the site would accommodate multiple museums, each with its own distinct architectural character. This large property, adjacent to the existing Smithsonian museums, offers increased density and heights, sweeping views, and placemaking opportunities. The location also avoids the many challenges presented by the focus sites, including size constraints, impacts to critical viewsheds and existing memorials, historic preservation impacts, and the elimination of recreational spaces. The consolidation of federal office space resulting from the shift to increased telework suggests now is the time to work with the General Services Administration and the U.S. Department of Energy to make this opportunity a reality.

The Commission has strongly emphasized that we are quickly reaching a point where there will not be any available sites left on the National Mall. As such, the Smithsonian should consider this momentous opportunity to establish new museum destinations on sites with symbolic significance and attractiveness to visitors, while offering much greater opportunity for programming, signature designs, and operational effectiveness. As described above, Independence Avenue and 10th Street, SW offer substantial opportunities for multiple museums. The Whitten Building remains a site worthy of further consideration. In past briefings, several Commissioners offered other suggestions, including areas around Union Station, the Federal Triangle, and Pennsylvania Avenue. Decades of planning have already been done for these areas, providing a foundation for the Smithsonian to set a new direction. I encourage the Smithsonian to continue thinking creatively and exploring these options more deeply. NCPC is ready to work with you on this endeavor.

Again, on behalf of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to participate in this important process. NCPC remains committed to assisting the Smithsonian Institution and other stakeholders in siting and designing museums that will commemorate the immense contributions of American Latinos and American Women. If you have any questions or need any additional information regarding our comments, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Beth White
Chair

Transmitted by email.
cc:
Commission Members and Alternates
Marcel Acosta, Executive Director
Ronald Cortez, Under Secretary for Administration, Smithsonian Institution
Kevin Gover, Under Secretary for Museums and Culture, Smithsonian Institution
Lisa Sasaki, Interim Director, Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum,
Jorge Zamanillo, Director, Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Latino
Greg Bettwy, Chief of Staff to the Secretary, Smithsonian Institution
Thomas Luebke, Secretary, U.S. Commission of Fine Arts
Appendix A: NCPC Comments on the Four Focus Sites

**The Arts and Industries Building (AIB) is a clear front-runner.** The AIB offers the prominence and visibility of a site within the Smithsonian’s South Mall Campus. As it is already under SI jurisdiction, the building could perhaps most quickly be opened as a new national museum. The site is not located within the Reserve. SI’s analysis appears to show a majority of either museum’s programs could fit within the building or in adjacent areas excavated and integrated into the facility. Through the South Mall Campus Master Plan, NCPC has already expressed support for some amount of excavation, particularly between AIB and the Quadrangle. Excavation to the north under Jefferson Drive and the National Mall should be avoided due to the potential for impacts to National Park Service property. While the national landmark designation of AIB creates some challenges, the building’s incredible architecture and history as a museum space create an exciting opportunity for an innovative design team willing to take on.

**The Northwest Capitol is a strong candidate site.** The location near the U.S. Capitol grounds, and along Pennsylvania Avenue has incredible prominence. This site has an opportunity to create perhaps the most functional open space of all the focus sites, which in turn would connect to Pennsylvania Avenue and the many events and activities which activate this nationally symbolic corridor. Like AIB, this site has the benefit of not being located within the Reserve. While the location is an incredible asset, impacts to the setting of the U.S. Capitol, important viewsheds and security needs will require careful study if a building is planned for this site.

**The Tidal Basin site has significant challenges.** The site is located within the Reserve and was not specifically identified in the enabling legislation. The site is not identified in any NCPC plans for a potential museum, including the Extending the Legacy Plan or Memorials and Museums Master Plan. Most significantly, a building at this location has the potential to alter views within the primary north-south vista extending from the White House to the Jefferson Memorial. These views are critical to maintain as they contribute to the visual importance and hierarchy of these nationally significant, symbolic monuments and memorials. The introduction of a building at this location would likely impact views to the Washington Monument and Jefferson Memorial, as well as the settings of these iconic structures. Finally, the site is an actively used recreational space and also an important operations and staging area for events on the National Mall. The elimination of this space for these functions will impact a variety of users. As such, the Smithsonian should avoid these significant constraints and consider other sites.

**The South Monument site is also significantly challenged.** Like the Tidal Basin site, this location is also within the Reserve. SI’s analysis indicates the site is too small to accommodate the necessary museum program without off-site space or multilevel

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excavation that would be challenging and costly to implement. The small block size could also impact the layout of any building floorplates and exhibition space. According to renderings and plans provided, the resulting building massing appears much too large for the relatively small site area. Other constraints will likely further restrict the buildable area. These include preserving the viewsheds to the Washington Monument and the preservation of the setback defined by the McMillan Plan. Setbacks on other frontages will be necessary to preserve a landscaped setting consistent with other museums on the National Mall. Simply put, the museum program and building does not appear to reasonably fit at this location, and other sites should be considered.