

**Statement of Lonnie G. Bunch III, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution**  
**Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies**  
**Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives**  
**May 12, 2022**

Chairwoman Pingree, Ranking Member Joyce, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today about the Smithsonian's FY 2023 budget request.

This morning, the National Science Foundation announced a groundbreaking discovery, an image of the Sagittarius A star, a supermassive black hole at the center of the Milky Way. The image was made possible by the Event Horizon Telescope, an international network of synchronized radio observatories founded by the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory's Sheperd Doeleman.

It is the second such image of a black hole SAO has helped create, and it is an example of the kind of cutting-edge, collaborative work we do, not only in science, but also in history, art, culture, and education.

I am proud of the Smithsonian's commitment during the past two years to continue working to help us understand our universe and ourselves while also working to ensure the health and safety of our visitors and staff. I have also been consistently impressed by our entire community of dedicated people who resolved to continue doing their work on behalf of the American people. They have been resilient, focused, and creative in how they navigated the obstacles in their way.

My goals for the Smithsonian Institution are driven by a belief that we will only succeed if we work together, both as an organization and as a nation. The past two years have reinforced that belief, as the Smithsonian has proven its ability to bring solutions to bear on the collective challenges society faces.

To be clear, though, despite our success in overcoming obstacles, there are some long-term concerns. Among these are the impact of the new museums, declining revenue during the pandemic, and the need to modernize and secure our systems as our digital capabilities improve. If we are to maximize our ability to help foster a better shared future for the Smithsonian and for us all, it will require the robust federal funding proposed in the FY 2023 Budget.

As you know, Congress authorized the creation of two new Smithsonian museums, the National Museum of the American Latino and the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum. I am excited to see what they become in the months and years ahead. They present a unique opportunity to blend tradition and innovation in new ways, using digital technology more effectively to reach more people and to have a profound impact on people's lives.

Much like the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the National Museum of the American Indian, people have long aspired to see these museums join the Smithsonian family. Each will allow us to further enrich the American narrative by elevating often underappreciated voices and by painting a more detailed, accurate picture about the United

States and the ongoing contributions of women and Latinos to the character and content of the nation.

These museums require planning for the obligations they will incur over time. They are each lifetime shared commitments between Congress and the Smithsonian, increasing our need to identify collections space, undertake maintenance, and address staffing in perpetuity. But I am confident that with your full support, we will be able to make these museums exemplars. I can report that things are proceeding well as we begin the first steps of making these museums a reality.

The National Museum of the American Latino's board of trustees was established in summer 2021. The board held its first meeting virtually in October 2021. The founding director of the Latino museum, Jorge Zamanillo, has joined us and a staff of 16 experienced Smithsonian Latino Center veterans has already been assembled.

The Smithsonian American Women's History Museum's 25-member advisory council was established in fall 2021. The council held its first meeting virtually Sept. 20, 2021. It will make recommendations on the location, planning and design of the museum and assist with fundraising. It is being led by interim director Lisa Sasaki, and an executive search firm is progressing in the search for a founding director.

As someone who went through the site selection process for the National Museum of African American History and Culture, I can testify how consequential a museum's location is, both as a symbol and as a driver of success. In choosing the sites for our newest museums, we enlisted a consulting firm to help us develop a strategic approach. We continue to apply due diligence to all the possible locations, including those enumerated in the museum legislation. We have narrowed the possibilities down and continue to make significant progress toward determining the finalists.

In addition to the creation of these eagerly anticipated new museums, we must also factor in the condition of our existing buildings when planning. Deferred maintenance continues to be a concern, especially with the risk it poses to our collections. Our most important facilities management issue is our ability to control environmental conditions and prevent water from getting in some of our buildings. With your ongoing support, we can address the needs of our aging infrastructure with strategic application of our day-to-day maintenance funds and by addressing aging systems through our capital projects. With nearly half of our current backlog located in the Air and Space museum and the Castle, our planned revitalizations will address the most pressing concerns.

Collection storage space must also factor into long-term planning. Given the added need of space due to two new museums and collection swing space for major revitalization of the Hirshhorn Museum and the National Museum of American History, the expansion of both Suitland, MD and Dulles, VA is vital to the Smithsonian. One near-term capital project is the new Museum Support Center Pod 6 that we will share with the National Gallery of Art and will help solve their space issues as well as ours.

The President's FY 2023 Budget addresses these challenges and your support and guidance give me great confidence in our future success.

As I reflected on lessons learned from the way we were able to become nimbler, more digital, and more connected during the past two years, and how much the nation depends on us to be what they need and deserve, it inspired me to organize the Smithsonian's priorities around the notion of "Our Shared Future." It is apt we meet today to talk about that shared future and about the role we each play in it.

We are implementing a series of initiatives based explicitly on that idea. The first was *Our Shared Future: Reckoning with our Racial Past*, which launched in June 2020 to help our country understand and grapple with the legacy of race and racism.

Upcoming initiatives in the *Our Shared Future* framework include *My Hometown*, an initiative that will engage under-reached rural audiences and form local partnerships to promote discussion and dialogue. By bringing the Smithsonian to every corner of America, we hope to reinforce the common threads that unite us as a people.

*Our Shared Future: Smithsonian Science* will seek to expand the reach, relevance, and impact of Smithsonian science and strengthen our institution-wide science coordination. One aspect of that will be *Life on a Sustainable Planet*, a plan to create a more sustainable and climate-ready Smithsonian and give people the tools to create positive environmental change.

The Smithsonian has a rich educational tradition. Building on our extensive history, vast resources, and reputation, I am encouraging more innovative thinking to ensure we are a key player in Pre-K–12 education. My goal is for the Smithsonian to reach every classroom in America. Educational materials based on our science and scholarship can enhance the ways students and teachers engage in 21st-century learning. We are developing a model of education and museum collaboration by working with the Washington, D.C., public school system. Sharing that work nationwide and abroad while drawing on best practices and lessons learned will expand our impact and help us make the most effective use of our resources.

Our Smithsonian Learning Lab website is another example of the kind of educational impact we made even when our buildings were closed. In the first month of school closures in the spring of 2020, the website saw a 346 percent increase in traffic compared to the same time the previous year, providing even more people with lesson plans, materials, and activities in arts, history, design, and STEM. An example of the vital STEM curricula we create is the Smithsonian Science Education Center's *COVID-19! How Can I Protect Myself and Others?* resource. By partnering with the World Health Organization, the Center developed this downloadable guide in multiple languages to help young people understand the medical and social science behind COVID-19 and give them the tools to keep themselves, their families, and their communities safe.

The success of online educational platforms also proved the Smithsonian's ability to pivot to a more digital institution, enabling us to reach more people who could not visit us in person. Our number of online visitors rose from 153 million in FY 2019 to more than 205 million in FY

2021. The Smithsonian will continue to maximize our digital potential. Our Head of Digital Transformation, the Smithsonian's first leadership role exclusively devoted to developing a pan-institutional digital strategy, leads our Digital Steering Group in developing plans to become a more virtual Smithsonian. By prioritizing digital initiatives and seeking out partnerships to leverage state-of-the-art resources, we can use a more expansive, unified digital portfolio to reach audiences across the nation and around the world.

Museums have also undergone a healthy re-examination of objects in our collections and how they were obtained. The National Museum of Natural History and the National Museum of the American Indian have long had robust efforts to repatriate cultural patrimony, but a growing awareness about the often-contested provenance of museum collections led us to examine our own collections more closely. The Smithsonian put together an Ethical Returns Working Group to identify ways to restore the rightful ownership of objects in our collections and increase our repatriation efforts.

When the Smithsonian works with other countries to retrieve and protect their cultural heritage, it is not only the right thing to do, but also in the nation's best interests. The international efforts of the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative are cultural diplomacy in action. When global conflict like that in Ukraine endangers lives and threatens to erase the culture and history of a people, it is vitally important to keep open all channels of dialogue.

The Smithsonian's mission of the "increase and diffusion of knowledge" is not just a slogan: for 175 years, it has been a covenant with the nation. We are obligated to lead responsibly and ethically, serving to enrich the lives of all Americans and people throughout the world. Whether giving students and teachers the tools to understand history, bringing people together to discuss issues that affect their communities, or peering across the stars for a clearer look at our galaxy, our work benefits everyone. With your help, we will be able to do so for another 175 years.

Thank you for holding this hearing, for your ongoing support, and for your commitment to helping us work toward a better shared future. I am happy to answer any questions you have.