

**Statement of Dr. David J. Skorton, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution**  
**“The Smithsonian Institution’s Priorities”**  
**Committee on House Administration, U.S. House of Representatives**  
**March 28, 2017**

Thank you Chairman Harper, Ranking Member Brady, and all Members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify before you today. It is a privilege to serve as the 13th Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. My colleagues and I appreciate the continued generous support of the Congress and your confidence in us and in our mission to understand, preserve, and tell the story of America and to inspire new generations to innovate and to aspire to the American Dream. Your investment in the Smithsonian is an investment in advancing the civic, educational, scientific, and artistic life of our nation.

It has been my pleasure to work with this Committee since arriving at the Smithsonian. It was a particular honor for the Institution to host the newly elected Members of the 115th Congress at the National Museum of African American History and Culture and for me to speak directly with them in Williamsburg as part of the orientation the committee provides its newest colleagues. It speaks volumes about the importance this Committee places on the role of art, history, science, education, and culture in public service.

As a public trust, the Smithsonian addresses some of the world’s most complex issues and uses constantly evolving technologies to broaden access to information for all Americans.

Thanks to the bequest of English scientist James Smithson, Congress established the Smithsonian Institution in 1846 as an independent federal trust instrumentality, a unique public-private partnership that has achieved outstanding results for 171 years. The federal commitment provides the foundation for all we do and is critically important in attracting private support. We leverage our federal funding to enrich the lives of the American people and advance our mission: “the increase and diffusion of knowledge.”

We are a world leader in research and discovery addressing today’s relevant issues, and the Institution helps the American people understand each other, themselves, and their role in the world through the arts and humanities. We use cutting-edge technology to create unprecedented access to our treasures and inspire educators, students, and learners of all ages.

The Smithsonian is large and diverse, encompassing art, history, science, education, and culture. We have 19 museums, 21 libraries, nine research centers, the National Zoo,

and 216 Affiliates in 46 states, Puerto Rico, and Panama. Our collections now total 156 million objects, including 145 million scientific specimens, 340,000 works of art, and 2 million library volumes. We also care for 156,000 cubic feet of archival material, 16,000 musical instruments, and more than 2,000 live animals. We are open 364 days a year. We have research and education facilities in eight states and the District of Columbia, and conduct research and other activities in more than 145 countries. For the last full fiscal year, our museums had more than 29 million visits and another 4.5 million people visited our traveling exhibitions. In addition, the magazines *Smithsonian* and *Air and Space* have a combined readership of more than 8 million people. The Smithsonian Channel is distributed by eight of the top nine cable TV operators and is available in 38 million households.

The year 2016 was exceptional for the Institution.

Our visitors were treated to more than 100 new exhibitions throughout all of our museums and the National Zoo.

Thanks to the work of our Digitization Program Office, we are now leaders in the field of 3D scanning, allowing our treasures and specimens to be seen in an entirely new light.

Our innovative work in genomics will make the Smithsonian a world leader in searching for answers to genome-scale questions about the animals, plants, and ecosystems of our planet.

We continued to produce educational materials ranging from supplementary resources for all grade levels to science curricula for K–8. More than 2,300 of these are tied to national standards and available online for free. Our STEM-centered, inquiry-based curricula are used in school districts in all 50 states and 25 countries.

Smithsonian scientists also work around the globe to help save endangered, vulnerable, and threatened species.

We collaborated with international partners to preserve the heritage of cultures in war zones and fought outbreaks of pandemic disease.

We explored the universe's boundless mysteries, from carbon planets capable of supporting life in its earliest existence to a planet currently forming in an Earth-like orbit around a young star.

The highlight of the year was the opening of our newest museum, the National Museum of African American History and Culture. After 30 years of legislative effort and a decade to turn a beautiful dream into a stunning reality, the museum has already hosted more than a million visitors and has shown us how powerful it can be to tell the nation's

story through one people's journey.

The year 2017 will be a time of transition at the Institution. We will continue to be guided during the next few months by our current Strategic Plan that focuses on five "Grand Challenges" that promote interdisciplinary and Institution-wide collaboration. Accordingly, we are improving facilities maintenance and collections care to be better stewards of America's treasures. We also continue to seek out new federal, state, and local partners to expand our reach.

In September 2016, the Chair of the Board of Regents, John McCarter, and I announced the formation of a committee to prepare the next strategic plan for the Smithsonian Institution. The effort is being led by the Strategic Planning Committee Co-Chairs, Regent Dr. Shirley Ann Jackson and Dr. Kirk Johnson, the Sant Director of the National Museum of Natural History. Since September, the Strategic Planning Committee has been analyzing data and developing a working draft of the new plan.

I will be working with the leaders of this effort to incorporate input from stakeholders across the Smithsonian before presenting the plan to the full Board of Regents, the White House, and the Congress.

The process of developing a new strategic plan involved reviewing the successes and challenges associated with our current plan while soliciting feedback and new ideas. The Institution is examining what it is doing well and what it can do better; assessing local, national, and global aspirations; considering strategies to improve the impact of museums and other education programs; and seeking new ways to position the Institution as a catalyst for meaningful conversations on issues affecting the nation and world.

A strong strategic plan will allow the Institution to focus even more effectively on key priorities that support everything we do such as improving the ways we pursue our core mission; better leveraging partnerships with U.S. and international cultural, scientific, and educational organizations in both the public and private sectors; communicating more effectively with our numerous constituencies; cultivating our donors and supporters; and identifying and advancing special initiatives.

As the Strategic Planning Committee continues its work, I am developing central themes that will complement the direction set by the Board of Regents in the next strategic plan.

The Institution will place a greater emphasis on convening critical conversations on topics of vital public interest, incorporating a creative and energetic focus on the arts throughout the Institution, promoting diversity leadership to increase inclusion in our

own museums and those throughout the country, emphasizing our global reach in programming and science, establishing thought leadership by more widely disseminating our scholarly findings and convening conversations, embedding the Smithsonian vision established by the new strategic plan into all of our operations, increasing digital access to our collections and research for the public, and refocusing capital expenditures on crucial maintenance and revitalization of existing facilities rather than the building of new museums.

Many Americans remain divided on social, intellectual, and scientific matters. At the same time, many have also lost trust in traditional American institutions, from government to religious organizations to the media. This dearth of trust has led to a lack of confidence in the information the citizenry needs to form educated opinions and make critical decisions.

How do we move beyond a mood of skepticism about the validity of information toward a future in which information is generally trusted? Where and how do we find venues where we can and will respectfully discuss, disagree, and debate, talking with each other instead of at each other?

More and more, the trustworthiness of information is derived from the perceived authority of its source. Since the nation's founding, people have consistently placed trust in museums and libraries. Even today, libraries and museums are considered honest purveyors of information and places for conversation about issues of local and national significance.

In many cities and rural areas across the United States, cultural institutions strengthen our communities through the arts, history, culture, and science. As the world's largest cultural, educational, and research institution, the Smithsonian must set an example by leading and participating in meaningful dialogue about the important issues facing our nation.

The ability to play this role depends on continuing to earn the trust of our leaders and the public. Cultural institutions cannot be seen as partisan or political. Our role is not to advocate or judge. Instead, cultural institutions aim to provide context and information—and often the forum—to knowledgeably and constructively address important issues.

To that end, on Earth Day 2017, the Smithsonian will convene the first Earth Optimism Summit, a three-day event featuring more than 150 scientists, thought leaders, philanthropists, conservationists, and civic leaders from across the political spectrum. Organized by the Smithsonian Conservation Commons, a team of conservation experts from the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, National

Zoological Park, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, and the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, Earth Optimism will explore solutions to global conservation efforts and provide a platform to discuss ways to apply findings and replicate successes.

While our museums and the Zoo provide the stage for dialogue, the dedicated work of Smithsonian scholars and scientists behind the scenes gives us the expertise and credibility to convene meaningful conversations.

We conduct cutting-edge research in nine research centers based in Massachusetts, New York, Washington, D.C., Virginia, Maryland, Florida, Arizona, and Panama. Our scientists, curators, and scholars conduct research in approximately 145 countries worldwide. These talented and committed people are national treasures as valuable to the Smithsonian as our vast historical collections.

The Smithsonian must be a place people feel comfortable learning new things, even when it challenges deeply held beliefs. We are here to serve the public, and that means from our Regents to our scientists to our curators, we check our politics at the door and continue to advance science as we have always done—by following where the data leads.

Science at the Smithsonian is anchored by our national collections. We have the Star-Spangled Banner; Morse's telegraph; Edison's light bulb; the Hope Diamond; the Wright Flyer; one of Amelia Earhart's planes; Louis Armstrong's trumpet; labor leader Cesar Chavez's jacket; the Lansdowne portrait of George Washington; the Congressional Gold Medal awarded to Japanese American World War II veterans; the *Spirit of Tuskegee* airplane; the camera John Glenn used on his voyage into space; a wide array of Asian, African, and American art; the Apollo 11 command module *Columbia*; the space shuttle *Discovery*; and a personal favorite that my father would have loved, Sandy Koufax's baseball mitt. We hold all these priceless national treasures in trust for the American people and preserve them for future generations to enjoy.

Digitization is a critical component of collections stewardship that strengthens inventory control through electronic record-keeping, enhances research, and increases access to audiences worldwide while prolonging the life of collection items by minimizing contact with objects. To date, we have digitized more than 29 million items, with many available to download in labs, in homes, and in classrooms.

In fiscal year (FY) 2016, the Digitization Program Office initiated an ambitious four-year project to digitize the entire collections of eight history, art, and culture collecting units through its Mass Digitization Program, working in close collaboration with the National Collections Program. When completed, we will have the ability to share these

collections more broadly, achieving new forms of outreach and impact. The Digitization Program Office continues to plan for the digitization of other collections, including participating with the National Museum of Natural History in a national effort to digitize fossils and working with the National Museum of American History to digitize its collection of 18,000 posters related to World War I and World War II.

Our Mass Digitization Program continues to increase the amount of digitized collections we can make available to the public. Through FY 2015–2016, this program has digitized more than 1 million Smithsonian collection items.

The 3D Digitization Program continues to extend the boundaries of what is possible in the 3D realm. We can now digitally experience sitting in the Apollo 11 command module, print replicas of historic remains recovered from the Jamestown settlement, and bring replicas of historic and scientific objects directly into classrooms throughout the country.

Of course it is not enough to digitize our objects; we must also preserve and protect them for future generations. In 2015, the Smithsonian completed a multiyear Institution-wide collections space planning initiative culminating in our Collections Space Framework Plan. The plan includes recommendations and a 30-year implementation to address current and Institution-wide collections space requirements in a strategic, integrated, and collaborative manner. The framework plan identified 34 percent of collections space as optimal, 19 percent as acceptable, and 47 percent as unacceptable based on Smithsonian-developed collections space standards. Of the collections space deemed unacceptable, 33 percent is at our Paul E. Garber Preservation, Restoration, and Storage Facility, which contains approximately 30 separate artifact storage buildings.

The plan now serves as a road map to guide short- and long-term facilities capital, real estate, and collections-care project decisions, providing renovation and new construction strategies that address the unacceptable collections-space conditions, allow for decompression of overcrowded collections to make them more physically accessible, anticipate future collections growth, and reduce or eliminate reliance on leased space for collections storage.

The Smithsonian has made significant strides in improving collections care through major facilities capital revitalization and construction projects. Past projects include construction of the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center which significantly increased the storage capacity for and public access to the collections of the National Air and Space Museum (NASM). Renovations at the National Museum of Natural History improved collections and laboratory space for invertebrate and paleobiology collections. The construction of Pod 5 at the Museum Support Center (MSC) allowed us to safely

preserve and make accessible scientific specimens stored in alcohol and formalin. Renovations to the existing MSC Pod 3 provided collections space for three Smithsonian art museums as well as physical anthropology and other collections requiring specialized environments such as Antarctic meteorites and frozen tissue samples. The recent renovation and reopening of the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum also resulted in a number of improved collections processing, conservation, and storage spaces.

To address near-term space requirements, the implementation of the Collections Space Framework Plan called for hazardous material mitigation and removal of collections from failing facilities at our Garber Facility. This high-priority project is now approximately 50 percent complete and has already improved the condition of more than 20,000 square feet in collections space.

Near-term projects that will advance the Collections Space Framework Plan include the construction of an additional storage pod at MSC and the construction of two new storage modules adjacent to the Udvar-Hazy Center, which would reduce the unacceptable space by another 14 percent, or approximately 126,000 square feet. The first of the Udvar-Hazy Center modules will be critical as it will also serve as temporary collections swing space when the NASM Mall building revitalization effort begins. Once completed, the space will then serve to relocate at-risk collections from the Garber Facility, further reducing the amount of unacceptable collections space.

With important collections spread across our museums and research centers, the maintenance of our facilities will be a focus for the Institution in the coming years. As you are aware, the Institution has a large backlog of maintenance and repairs that had to be put off to a future time, officially deemed Deferred Maintenance and Repairs. Currently, the Deferred Maintenance and Repairs estimate for Smithsonian facilities stands at approximately \$898 million.

To address the backlog, our maintenance program establishes five-year plans with proposed investment levels intended to prevent further deferred maintenance while reducing it over time in coordination with our capital program. To do this, the National Research Council recommends an annual maintenance budget in the range of 2 to 4 percent of a physical plant's aggregate current replacement value. The Smithsonian's FY 2016 maintenance budget represents 1 percent of that value. To make best use of the funding available, the Institution uses a reliability-centered maintenance philosophy. By employing smart technologies that monitor conditions, we strive to perform the appropriate maintenance at the right time.

Reducing this backlog is critical to ensuring the long-term success of the Institution and providing the best value to the American taxpayer. Reducing the backlog

will help preserve the useful life of a building and can prevent the need make costlier capital improvements and renovations in the years ahead.

One such renovation of which this Committee is keenly aware is the NASM Revitalization Project. As discussed in a previous hearing at this Committee, we had long planned to replace NASM's building systems, which are 40 years old and have exceeded their useful lives. These systems were originally designed for two million annual visitors. The NASM Mall building has approximately 7 million visitors annually—nearly four times the projected amount. In fact, it is consistently the most visited museum in the United States. The new systems simply must accommodate the true number of visitors while maintaining proper environmental conditions for collections.

When we studied the building more extensively, we determined that the stone originally used on the exterior was cut too thin. The cladding is failing and must be replaced, and the stone has become too fragile to be reused. This makes the project significantly more complex and more expensive.

As you are aware, the 35 percent design estimates for the NASM project came in at \$676 million. As the design process for the project evolves, every effort is being made to contain the costs. The museum will leverage this federal investment by raising an additional \$250 million in private support to totally revamp the 23 galleries throughout the facility. The result will be an exciting new experience for our visitors and a building that will host millions of visitors well into the future.

A particular challenge to this project is the need to store and protect the museum's collection during construction. For FY 2017, we requested funding to build the first storage module of a "Dulles Collections Center" on the site of our Udvar-Hazy Center at an estimated cost of \$50 million. As previously mentioned, at the conclusion of the NASM Revitalization Project, we will use this storage module to house artifacts currently stored at aging buildings that were intended to be used temporarily at the Garber Facility. Removal of old, inadequate facilities is essential to implementing our Collections Space Framework Plan.

Previous Smithsonian revitalization projects have generally been funded by a mix of federal and private funding, with federal funding focusing on structures and systems and private funding focusing on exhibit areas. In the case of the NASM Revitalization Project, the Smithsonian is planning to raise private funds for the redesign of all exhibit areas and exhibit fabrication. It is estimated that a total of \$250 million will need to be privately raised from individuals, foundations, and corporations to transform our 23 exhibits in the National Mall building. The Smithsonian will use the building revitalization as an opportunity to modernize the way NASM interacts with visitors.



The current renovation plan sequences the construction from west to east along the museum's seven zones, thereby allowing at least 50 percent of the museum to remain open at all times so that we can provide access to the millions of visitors who come to this inspiring museum.

While we recognize that renovating the museum will be an enormous expense, we believe it is essential. As we sit here today in the shadow of the newly restored Capitol Dome, it is clear that the buildings on the National Mall are more than just brick and mortar. They are an essential part of our public infrastructure, a legacy for future generations, and a testament to the greatness of our nation.

While the Smithsonian is nationally important, its reach is global. Every day, we work with partners around the world to protect and preserve cultural heritage, fight pandemic disease, and save species from extinction. The Institution has had an international presence since its founding, but to date has never brought our experience and expertise in exhibits and education to other shores. Soon, that may change. Our participation in the development of Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in East London continues to progress. In June, we announced our intention to enter into a groundbreaking collaboration with the world-renowned Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) through its future development, V&A East. The Boards of both the V&A and the Smithsonian authorized their respective leaders to sign a non-binding Letter of Intent to outline the plan and process of this collaboration; we hope this agreement will be finalized in 2017. The primary activity will be a combined exhibition space to be jointly curated by Smithsonian and V&A staff members, along with temporary space for Smithsonian exhibitions. It is anticipated that the new building will open in 2022, helping expand the Smithsonian's scope to new audiences without drawing from federal resources.

As we look toward FY 2018, I have convened a group of ten directors from units throughout the Institution to serve as a budget review panel. They will look holistically at potential budget scenarios and make recommendations to ensure the most efficient use of our precious federal resources.

Despite budget constraints, we need to continually improve our work to more completely and effectively tell the story of America and all Americans. Given the challenges of these budgetary constraints and significant needs to renovate our current facilities, it is essential that we ensure our capital resources are fully utilized for maintaining and revitalizing existing facilities, not constructing new museums.

Currently, there are recommendations by the National Museum of the American Latino Commission and the American Museum of Women's History Congressional Commission to establish new museums under the Smithsonian. Concurrently, there is a

new effort to establish such a commission for the study of a National Museum of Asian Pacific American History and Culture. These efforts are admirable.

Given our current demands, however, we do not have the capacity or resources to bring the dreams of new museums to fruition. As such, we must commit to telling the story of all Americans more completely with the resources already at our disposal. We will continue to support programming from the Smithsonian's Latino and Asian Pacific Centers and explore the diversity of our past at the National Museum of American History. We also plan in the near future to establish a Women's History Initiative at the Institution as we strive to tell the story of all Americans.

We are only able to accomplish all that we do thanks to more than 6,500 dedicated employees—award-winning scientists and scholars, curators, researchers, historians, and experts in fields from astrophysics to zoology—and more than 6,300 generous on-site volunteers, more than 800 research fellows, more than 900 research associates, nearly 1,800 interns, and more than 7,200 digital volunteers. Our people leverage their intellect and talent to benefit the Smithsonian and the world many times over. Their level of commitment makes it unsurprising that the Smithsonian was, for the sixth year in a row, ranked as one of the best places to work in the federal government.

With the continuing support of the Congress, the Administration, our Board of Regents, and the American people, we will offer more opportunities to enlighten and engage the public in the future.

I am forever honored to be a part of this great Institution that serves our nation and the world. Today, with its free museums, distinguished research and scholars, iconic American treasures, and vast array of information accessible from its websites, the Smithsonian is a resource of extraordinary value for the American people and the world. I believe the Smithsonian has proven its worth as an investment in the future as well as a steward of our past. We face a future that holds both exciting opportunities and imposing challenges. I am confident that with the continued support of the Congress and the Administration, the Smithsonian will be an even more important, relevant, and unifying presence in an increasingly diverse and vibrant America.