

**Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Federal Lands Subcommittee Hearing
Testimony of Ronald Cortez
Under Secretary for Finance and Administration and Chief Financial Officer
Smithsonian Institution
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Thank you, Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and all Members of the Committee for the opportunity to discuss H.R. 1329, a bill to permit the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum to be located within the Reserve of the National Mall. I would also like to thank the sponsor of H.R. 1329, Representative Nicole Malliotakis, along with the more than 230 co-sponsors. Congresswoman Malliotakis has been a tireless champion for this Museum and the Smithsonian, and we deeply appreciate her commitment to its success.

My name is Ron Cortez, and I serve as the Under Secretary for Finance and Administration and Chief Financial Officer for the Smithsonian Institution. I have been with the Smithsonian for over four years and have led administrative operations for large-scale organizations for more than 28 years. In this role, I oversee the Institution's operational offices which provide critical support to the Smithsonian's museums and the National Zoo, as well as our education centers, research facilities, and more. My office manages over 2,000 employees specializing in human and financial resources; information technology; procurement; safety and security; and most importantly for today's hearing - planning, facilities operations, maintenance and capital programs.

In 2020, Congress passed, and President Trump signed into law, a bill authorizing the creation of the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum. That legislation directed the Smithsonian Board of Regents to select a site for the museum within two years of enactment. The legislation enumerated specific sites for consideration, including the site I'll discuss today, as well as a clear expectation that the museum be located on or near the National Mall.

After passage, we immediately got to work identifying sites. In all, we evaluated a total of 27 locations in Washington, D.C. We then evaluated them on broad criteria that considered location, accessibility for visitors, proximity to other Smithsonian Museums and costs. We sought input from regulatory bodies, local elected officials, community groups, supporters, and Congressional stakeholders. The list of sites was narrowed to a handful of locations that were considered by Smithsonian Leadership, our Board of Regents, and the American Women's History Museum Advisory Council.

Ultimately, the nearly 18-month process identified an optimal location on the "South Monument site," which is located on the National Mall and bordered by the southwest locations of 14th Street, Jefferson Drive, Raoul Wallenberg Place, and Independence Avenue. This location mirrors the location of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, balancing the development on the South side of the National Mall. This was the top listed site for consideration in the authorizing legislation and precisely where the original sponsors envisioned the museum. In 2022, the Smithsonian Board of Regents identified the South Monument site as the optimal location for the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum based on the outcomes of the site-selection process.

The South Monument site provides various advantages. As an unoccupied space, there would be no need to relocate any offices or demolish an existing structure, saving time and money. We would be able to build a custom facility that meets the needs of the visitors.

We would also be able to move quickly, prevent cost escalation, and meet the public expectation that this museum would be a prominent addition to the American story as told by the other buildings on the National Mall.

We are here today to discuss H.R. 1329 because the 2020 legislation authorizing the creation of the Women's History Museum provided a contradiction: it both prohibited using the Reserve for a site while at the same time directed Smithsonian to consider the South Monument site which is in the Reserve. The legislation did not empower the Smithsonian to move forward on this site recommendation.

Recommending use of the Reserve for this museum is not a suggestion we make lightly, as the Commemorative Works Act designates the Reserve as a complete work of civic architecture. Our Nation's capital, specifically the National Mall, must have space for Americans to gather. This need will be made even more clear this summer when we gather to commemorate 250 years as a Nation.

But the National Mall is not just a place to gather. It conveys a message about our shared national values, our achievements, and our history. Exemptions to using the Reserve should not be given without reason, and we would not have put this suggestion forward if we did not think this merited Congress's thoughtful consideration. The Smithsonian has demonstrated its ability to design and construct additions in the Reserve and with all of its Mall facing facilities, most recently with the National Museum of the American Indian and the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Smithsonian facilities play a key role in creating the National Mall's powerful sense of place and purpose. It's a responsibility we take seriously and are honored to steward.

Should this Bill become law, we will be taking a paramount step toward the Museum's opening day. Knowing what space we will have unlocks our ability to design a building and plan for the future.

This museum is a public-private partnership, with the Smithsonian committing to raising half of the funds needed to construct it. To date this museum has raised over \$71 Million. Formally identifying a site further demonstrates the federal commitment to the project and inspires the confidence we need from additional donors to make financial commitments.

While there is still a long way to go, establishing this site would prevent additional delays and their associated costs as well as permit the Museum to begin planning its long-term vision.

If signed into law, we are confident that we can deliver a world-class museum at this location that is worthy of the Smithsonian and the American people.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today, and I welcome your questions.