

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF ROBBIE LAUF

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Committee on Natural Resources

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Legislative Hearing on S. 675, the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library Act

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Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, Chairman Westerman, and members of the Subcommittee — thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of S. 675, the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library Act.

In his annual message to the Fifty-eighth Congress on December 6, 1904, Theodore Roosevelt told this body: “*We owe it to future generations to keep alive the noble and beautiful creatures which by their presence add such distinctive character to the American wilderness.*” He was writing about wildlife. But the sentence describes an obligation, and obligations have costs. Someone pays to keep a thing alive for the generation that has not arrived yet. That is what this testimony is about.

Before anything else, a word of thanks. Senator Hoeven wrote this bill and has carried it across two Congresses. Senator Cramer and Senator Blumenthal joined him — two Republicans from North Dakota and a Democrat from Connecticut — and the Senate passed it by unanimous consent on June 22, 2026, without a single voice raised against it.

That is worth pausing on, because it is not how most legislation moves. Theodore Roosevelt has a way of doing that to Americans. He is claimed by conservationists and by ranchers, by reformers and by people who distrust reformers, by those who admire his restraint abroad and those who admire his boldness. Families arrive at this Library from every state and every political disposition, and they do not sort themselves at the door. Roosevelt belongs to all of them. A bill about his legacy ought to move the way this one has, and it has.

The provision that brings me here is Section 3(a): a federal cost-share, capped at \$50,000,000 and matched many times over by non-federal dollars, for preserving materials relating to Roosevelt’s life and making them available to the American public.

The library the federal government never built

Theodore Roosevelt's presidency falls just outside the federal presidential library system. That system begins with Herbert Hoover; Roosevelt died in January 1919, thirty-six years before the Presidential Libraries Act of 1955. For most of the century that followed, the record of one of the most consequential presidencies in American history stayed scattered — papers at the Library of Congress and at Harvard, objects at Sagamore Hill, specimens and artifacts in national parks and federal collections across the country. There was no single place where an American family could go to encounter Roosevelt whole.

So private citizens built one. The Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library opened to the public on July 4, 2026, in Medora, North Dakota, on the edge of the Badlands where Roosevelt ranched, grieved, and — by his own account in his 1913 autobiography — became the man who would later hold this country's highest office. The Foundation is an independent 501(c)(3). The Library was built with private and state dollars. No federal funds went into its construction, into fabricating its exhibits, or into its operating costs.

Demand has outrun the building. Over the last fifteen days of operation, fourteen sold at least eighty-six percent of available tickets, and Saturdays now sell out. That is a good problem to have, and it is also a limit: admissions revenue cannot simply scale to cover what this collection requires, because the Library cannot sell what it does not have room to admit.

It is worth putting that number beside the one the country has lived with. Sagamore Hill, Roosevelt's home on Long Island, is a National Historic Site the Park Service cares for beautifully — but it is a house. Tours run in small groups on a limited schedule, and roughly 20,000 people a year can walk through it. That is not a shortcoming; it is the honest capacity of a historic home. It does mean that for a century, the number of Americans who could stand inside Theodore Roosevelt's world in any given year was measured in the low tens of thousands.

In sixty-one days, more people encountered Roosevelt in Medora than can pass through Sagamore Hill in roughly four years. The two are complements, not competitors — Sagamore Hill offers an intimacy this Library cannot, and this Library offers a capacity Sagamore Hill was never built to carry. Between them, and with the National Park a few minutes away, the country finally has somewhere to put the demand.

The location is not incidental to this Subcommittee's work. Medora is the gateway community to Theodore Roosevelt National Park — the only national park in the country named for a person — and the park's South Unit entrance sits a few minutes from the Library's front door. Visitors who come for one discover the other. A family can stand in front of the diary Roosevelt kept the worst night of his life, then drive fifteen minutes into the country that gave him back to himself. What this Subcommittee oversees and what this Library interprets are the same landscape, in the same small town, telling the same story.

One note on the bill's own language. S. 675 was written before the doors opened, and its text still refers to a Library "to be located in Medora." That is no longer the situation before this Subcommittee. As of this morning the Library has been open 61 days, and in those 61 days more than 75,000 people have walked through the galleries. What follows is a report from an operating institution, not a proposal for one.

What is on view in Medora — and who made it possible

Before any of that, the credit belongs where it is owed. Much of what is inside this building came from the federal government itself. The Library of Congress, the National Archives and Records Administration, the National Park Service, and the Smithsonian Institution have been generous and rigorous partners. Their material is in our galleries because their curators, registrars, and conservators did painstaking work alongside ours. Nothing in this testimony should be read as a complaint about them. Those relationships are strong, and Section 3(b) — which addresses loans from agencies under the Secretary's jurisdiction, including the National Park Service — steadies an arrangement that is already working well.

What is gathered there is, so far as we know, without precedent. Objects from across the whole arc of Roosevelt's life — drawn from federal collections, from private lenders, and from the Foundation's own holdings — are in one place for the public for the first time. His father's Bible, presented by the newsboys whose lodging house the elder Roosevelt helped establish. The diary he opened on the night of February 14, 1884, having lost his wife and his mother in the same house within hours of each other — the page marked with a heavy black X and a single line beneath it. His Medal of Honor. The Tiffany hunting knife and the buckskin suit from his Badlands years. His Rough Rider uniform, his sword, his campaign hat. The portrait of Abraham Lincoln that hung in his White House office, the one he looked up at when a decision was hard.

And from the Smithsonian Institution, the specimens Roosevelt's own African expedition sent home to science more than a century ago — a lioness and her cubs, and an array of birds — much of it not on long-term public view in decades. Each specimen still carries its original field tag. On the tags is Roosevelt's handwriting, and his signature. The same hand that signed legislation cataloged these animals in the field, one at a time. A century later, his pen is still there on the tag.

A visitor in Medora can walk from a New York parlor to the Badlands to the White House to Africa in a single afternoon. That has not been possible before, anywhere.

The request: Section 3(a)

Section 3(a)(1) authorizes the Secretary of the Interior, to the extent provided in advance in appropriations Acts, to provide grants totaling not more than \$50,000,000 for two purposes:

to preserve and make available to the public materials relating to Roosevelt's life, and to provide interpretive and educational services that communicate the meaning of that life.

Section 3(a)(2) conditions any grant on the Foundation first certifying that it has received at least \$100,000,000 from the State of North Dakota or from non-federal sources. That threshold was cleared years ago and then left far behind. Private philanthropy has given \$400 million to this Library. The State of North Dakota added a \$50 million endowment — itself earned by meeting a private-match challenge the Legislature set in 2019. Total non-federal investment stands at \$450 million.

Set against the bill, those numbers are worth stating plainly: \$450 million raised against a \$100 million statutory threshold, and against a maximum federal authorization of \$50 million. Private citizens and one state have already put up nine dollars for every dollar S. 675 authorizes. This Subcommittee is not being asked to fund a project. It is being asked to join one, as by far the smaller partner.

What it took — and what Section 3(a) would backfill

None of that happened by accident, and none of it was free. When institutions like these agree to send their holdings to western North Dakota, they are entrusting a private foundation with objects that belong to the American people. That trust has to be earned before a single crate is opened.

So the Library was built to earn it. Conservation and collections space. Environmental systems that hold temperature and humidity within tight tolerances. Exhibit cases and mounts built to specification. Security and monitoring, fire suppression, insurance, and climate-controlled transport. Those were not amenities, and they were not choices. They were the standard required of an institution asking to be trusted with the nation's treasures — and this institution built to that standard because the things it was asking for are irreplaceable.

The Library met that standard and paid for all of it privately. The conservation, the casework, the environmental systems, the security infrastructure, and the transport required to secure and protect these objects and place them on public view were funded entirely by private gifts and private borrowing. Not one dollar of it came from the federal government, and a portion of it is carried as debt today — debt raised against future philanthropy, to care for property the American people already own.

That work is precisely what Section 3(a)(1)(A) describes: preserving materials relating to the life of President Theodore Roosevelt, and making them available to the public. Federal cost-share under Section 3(a) would backfill what private philanthropy has already advanced for that purpose — nothing broader. It would not support maintenance or operation of the Library; Section 3(a)(3) forbids that, and the prohibition should stay exactly where it is. This

institution is not asking the federal government to run it, or to pay for running it. The request is a share of the cost of protecting and displaying materials that tell the story of an American president — much of which the federal government itself owns.

What federal cost-share would free

Every dollar applied against what private donors have already advanced is a dollar released for the second purpose the bill authorizes, interpretive and educational services under Section 3(a)(1)(B):

- **Free classroom resources for every state.** The Library publishes its teaching materials online at no cost to any educator in the country. A teacher in Vermont or Arizona can build a unit on Roosevelt, conservation, and citizenship without spending a dollar or leaving the classroom.
- **Teacher training, delivered nationally.** Professional development institutes in leadership, citizenship, and conservation, built on primary sources and offered at no cost — with virtual sessions so that participating does not require the trip to Medora.
- **Primary sources, open to everyone.** Roosevelt’s digitized papers and the Library’s research tools are freely available to students, teachers, and scholars anywhere in the country.
- **Distance programming.** Live virtual field trips and public programs reaching classrooms in every state represented on this Subcommittee, and in every state that is not.

This is the part of the request with the widest reach. A building in North Dakota serves the people who can get to North Dakota. A free Roosevelt curriculum serves a classroom in every congressional district in the country, at almost no marginal cost. Under Section 3(a)(1)(B), that is exactly what federal grant dollars are authorized to support.

What the bill does not do

The limits Congress has already written into this measure are worth stating plainly:

- **No operating subsidy.** Section 3(a)(3) prohibits grant funds from being used for maintenance or operation. The Library’s operating costs remain a private responsibility, permanently.
- **No federal control.** Section 3(c) provides that the Secretary and any other federal entity “*shall have no involvement in the operation of the Library,*” except at the request of the non-federal entity operating it. This Library will not become a federal facility, and does not ask to be.

- **No spending outside the appropriations process.** Grants are available only “*to the extent provided in advance in appropriations Acts,*” and Section 3(a)(4) makes clear that nothing in the bill requires an increase in the applicable suballocation under section 302(b) of the Congressional Budget Act.
- **No cost for the loans themselves.** Section 3(b) provides for loans without monetary consideration. It transfers custody, not title, and carries no price tag for the taxpayer.

Conclusion

Roosevelt came to the Badlands in 1883 as a young man with a famous name and no particular claim on the country’s memory. He left a different person, and the country has been living with the consequences ever since — in the national forests, in the first federal bird reservations, in the public lands this Subcommittee oversees, and in a conception of public service Americans across the political spectrum still measure themselves against.

The objects that tell that story belong to the American people. They are gathered, conserved, secured, and on public view in Medora, North Dakota, cared for to the standard their owners require. The building that houses them, the exhibits that present them, and the operations that keep the doors open were paid for by private citizens and one state, without federal support. S. 675 asks the federal government to carry a share of that cost, on terms Congress itself wrote: matched many times over, barred from operations, and subject to appropriations.

I respectfully urge the Subcommittee to act favorably on S. 675. Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

Appendix A: S. 675 at a glance

Provision	Effect
Sec. 3(a)(1)	Authorizes Interior grants up to \$50,000,000 total, subject to appropriations, for preservation of Roosevelt materials and for interpretive and educational services
Sec. 3(a)(2)	Requires Foundation certification of at least \$100,000,000 from the State of North Dakota or non-federal sources before any grant (2:1 match)
Sec. 3(a)(3)	Prohibits use of grant funds for maintenance or operation
Sec. 3(a)(4)	Requires no increase in the applicable 302(b) suballocation
Sec. 3(b)	Within 180 days of enactment, authorizes agreements to loan federal museum artifacts and objects — particularly those not on public display — from Interior agencies including NPS and FWS, without monetary consideration

Provision	Effect
Sec. 3(c)	Bars federal involvement in operation of the Library except at the request of the non-federal operator

Legislative status. Introduced February 20, 2025 by Sen. Hoeven (R-ND); cosponsored by Sen. Cramer (R-ND) and Sen. Blumenthal (D-CT). Energy and Natural Resources Committee discharged by unanimous consent June 22, 2026; passed the Senate the same day by unanimous consent with a substitute amendment (SA 5897). Received in the House and held at the desk June 23, 2026. A predecessor measure passed the Senate in the 118th Congress but was not acted on by the House.