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Smithsonian Institution Museums: Selected Issues for Congress

Updated July 26, 2024

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

R44370



Smithsonian Institution Museums: Selected Issues for Congress

The Smithsonian Institution is arguably best known for its museums along the National Mall in Washington, DC. In 2023, Smithsonian museums and the National Zoo received approximately 17.7 million visits.

This report provides information and analysis of selected policy issues Congress might consider related to Smithsonian museums. These include siting and potential construction costs of the Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum (SAWHM) and the National Museum of the American Latino (NMAL), as well as issues related to the establishment of new Smithsonian museums and the potential incorporation of existing museums into the Smithsonian.

Further information about the Smithsonian is available in CRS In Focus IF12718, *Smithsonian Institution: Background, Entities, and Leadership* and CRS In Focus IF12719, *Smithsonian Institution: Selected Legislation, 118th Congress*, both by R. Eric Petersen.

R44370

July 26, 2024

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The Smithsonian Institution is a complex of museum, education, research, and revenue-generating entities primarily located in the Washington, DC, region, with additional facilities and activities across the United States and world. The institution is arguably best known for its museums along the National Mall in Washington, DC. All Smithsonian museums, and its National Zoo, received approximately 17.7 million visits in 2023. This report provides information and analysis of Smithsonian museums, including the following:

- siting and potential construction costs of two new museums established by Congress in 2020, the Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum (SAWHM) and the National Museum of the American Latino (NMAL); and
- issues related to the establishment of new Smithsonian museums, and the potential incorporation of existing museums into the Smithsonian.

Further information about the Smithsonian is available in CRS In Focus IF12718, *Smithsonian Institution: Background, Entities, and Leadership* and CRS In Focus IF12719, *Smithsonian Institution: Selected Legislation, 118th Congress*, both by R. Eric Petersen.

New Smithsonian Museums: Siting and Construction

On December 27, 2020, Congress created two new Smithsonian museums with the enactment of P.L. 116-260, Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021. Title I of Division T of the law created in the Smithsonian a comprehensive women’s history museum, subsequently named by the Smithsonian Board of Regents (Regents) as the Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum.¹ The act established a SAWHM council, charged with making recommendations to the Regents on the planning, design, and construction of the SAWHM museum, and other duties. A director was authorized to be appointed to oversee the museum and its staff, and to carry out educational and liaison programs in support of museum goals.

Title II of Division T established the National Museum of the American Latino.² The law establishes a board for the NMAL museum to advise and assist the Regents on matters related to the administration and preservation of the museum. A director of the museum is authorized to manage the museum and carry out educational and liaison programs in support of its goals. The act requires the director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to execute grant programs and a scholarship program, including a grant program to promote the understanding of the Latin American diaspora in the United States.

In February 2022, the Smithsonian announced the appointment of the founding director of NMAL.³ In March 2024, the director of SAWHM was appointed.⁴

¹ 20 U.S.C. 80t.

² 20 U.S.C. 80u.

³ Smithsonian Institution, “Jorge Zamanillo Named First Director of the New Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Latino,” press release, February 4 2022, <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/releases/jorge-zamanillo-named-first-director-new-smithsonians-national-museum-american>.

⁴ Smithsonian Institution, “Elizabeth C. Babcock Named Director of the Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum,” press release, March 12, 2024, <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/releases/elizabeth-c-babcock-named-director-smithsonian-american-womens-history-museum>.

SAWHM and NMAL Siting

The Regents were required to designate sites for the SAWHM and NMAL by December 2022. Congress required that sites for both museums be located in Washington, DC, and stated its intent that they be located on or adjacent the National Mall, to the maximum extent practicable. In October 2022, the Smithsonian announced what it described as two optimal locations for the museums. One, known as the “South Monument site,” is located on the National Mall and bordered by 14th Street SW, Jefferson Drive SW, Raoul Wallenberg Place SW, and Independence Avenue SW. The other site, identified by some as the “Tidal Basin site,” is located to the south of the South Monument site, and west of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. It is bordered by Raoul Wallenberg Place SW, Maine Avenue SW, and Independence Avenue SW. The Smithsonian stated that legislative action would be necessary before the Regents could make their final designations.⁵ In congressional testimony in June 2024, Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie G. Bunch stated that the South Monument was intended as the site of the SAWHM, with the Tidal Basin site intended for the NMAL.⁶

Both locations are under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service (NPS). The proposed sites are within the Reserve, an area of the National Mall and adjacent grounds subject to the Commemorative Works Act (CWA).⁷ Congress exempted the SAWHM and NMAL from the requirements of CWA, but prohibited locating the museums in the Reserve.⁸

Potential Costs of New Museums

The establishment of the SAWHM and NMAL could represent a significant demand for appropriated and nonappropriated resources to establish new museum facilities, and enduring increases in annual appropriations provided for Smithsonian operations. In congressional testimony, Secretary Bunch noted that private supporters of both the SAWHM and NMAL had each raised more than \$60 million toward the costs of constructing museum buildings.⁹ P.L. 116-260 authorizes the Regents to meet 50% of the cost of construction for each museum, paid from appropriated funds, with 50% for each museum met by nonfederal resources. The precise funding requirements of the two new museums cannot be predicted authoritatively, but potential guidance on costs may be drawn from the costs of building facilities and operational expenditures of the two most recently completed Smithsonian museums, the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) and the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI).

New Museum Facilities

The planning, design, construction, and exhibit development of new museum facilities appears to be a years-long process of fundraising, designing facilities to fit a chosen site, and remediating site, design, and other challenges. When fully realized, construction projects may exceed original

⁵ Smithsonian Institution, “Smithsonian Identifies Two Optimal Sites for New Museums,” press release, October 27, 2022, <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/releases/smithsonian-identifies-two-optimal-sites-new-museums>.

⁶ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, *Oversight of the Smithsonian Institution*, hearings, 118th Cong., 2nd sess., June 18, 2024, <https://www.rules.senate.gov/hearings/oversight-of-the-smithsonian-institution-06-18-2024>.

⁷ For detailed discussion of the Commemorative Works Act, see CRS Report R41658, *Commemorative Works in the District of Columbia: Background and Practice*.

⁸ 20 U.S.C. 80t—5(d), 20 U.S.C. 80u—(2)(g)(4).

⁹ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, *Oversight of the Smithsonian Institution*, hearings, 118th Cong., 2nd sess., June 18, 2024, <https://www.rules.senate.gov/hearings/oversight-of-the-smithsonian-institution-06-18-2024>.

budget estimates. **Table 1** provides the original estimates for building the NMAI and NMAAHC facilities in nominal and constant 2024 dollars. In constant dollars, the final stated cost of NMAI facilities was approximately 43% higher than originally estimated; final stated NMAAHC costs were approximately 38% higher.

Table 1. Initial Construction Estimates and Final Costs, NMAI and NMAAHC
Nominal and Constant 2024 Dollars, Millions

Entity	Initial Estimate Nominal\$		Final Cost Nominal\$		Initial Estimate Constant\$		Final Cost Constant\$		% Difference
	Year	Cost	Year	Cost	Year	Cost	Year	Cost	
NMAI	1990	\$106	2004	\$219	2004	\$253	2004	\$362	43%
NMAAHC	2003	\$300	2016	\$540	2016	\$509	2016	\$702	38%

Sources: Smithsonian Institution, *Budget Justifications for Fiscal Year 1991*, February 1990, p. 289; Lynette Clemetson, “Bush Authorizes a Black History Museum,” *The New York Times*, December 17, 2003, p. A34; Smithsonian Institution, “National Museum of the American Indian Architecture Fact Sheet,” July 2014; Smithsonian Institution, “National Museum of African American History and Culture: Design and Construction,” September 1, 2016; Lonnie G. Bunch III, *A Fool’s Errand: Creating the National Museum of African American History and Culture in the Age of Bush, Obama, and Trump* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2019), p. 49; and CRS calculations.

Museum facilities can vary in size, location, and scope, which can make comparing projects or estimating future costs challenging. Presenting cost information per square foot of a proposed museum or museum exhibition might be of assistance to Congress when considering potential cost estimates for new Smithsonian museums. Estimated costs per square foot for the NMAI and NMAAHC in nominal and constant 2024 dollars are provided in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Initial Construction Estimates and Final Costs per Square Foot, NMAI and NMAAHC
Nominal and Constant 2024 Dollars

Entity	Building Size Square Feet	Initial Estimate Nominal\$		Final Cost Nominal\$		Initial Estimate Constant\$		Final Cost Constant\$	
		Year	\$/SF	Year	\$/SF	Year	\$/SF	Year	\$/SF
NMAI	250,000	1990	\$424	2004	\$876	2004	\$1,016	2004	\$1,456
NMAAHC	400,000	2003	\$750	2016	\$1,350	2016	\$1,278	2016	\$1,763

Sources: CRS calculations based on data reported in Smithsonian Institution, *Budget Justifications for Fiscal Year 1991*, February 1990, p. 289; Lynette Clemetson, “Bush Authorizes a Black History Museum,” *The New York Times*, December 17, 2003, p. A34; Smithsonian Institution, “National Museum of the American Indian Architecture Fact Sheet,” July 2014; Smithsonian Institution, “National Museum of African American History and Culture: Design and Construction,” September 1, 2016; and Lonnie G. Bunch III, *A Fool’s Errand: Creating the National Museum of African American History and Culture in the Age of Bush, Obama, and Trump* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2019), p. 49.

Note: “\$/SF” denotes cost per square foot.

In congressional testimony about the costs of potential new museums, Secretary Bunch stated that “[g]iven expected construction cost increases and the challenges of the preferred sites, a comparable new museum will likely exceed the costs of building the National Museum of African

American History and Culture.”¹⁰ Construction on the NMAAHC was completed in 2016, and cost approximately \$702 million in constant 2024 dollars.

The range of potential estimated costs of construction of a new Smithsonian museum provided in **Table 3** is based on the results of analysis of the final stated costs of construction for the NMAAHC, and differences between initial cost estimates and stated final costs for the NMAI (43%) and NMAAHC (38%), provided in constant 2024 dollars. This model is one of many potential methods of estimating potential museum construction costs. Models based on different initial estimates, or cost data based on plans that vary from the planning assumptions and cost estimates for the NMAAHC, could result in different estimates of costs.

Table 3. Potential Estimated Costs of Construction, for New Smithsonian Museums

Based on NMAAHC Construction Costs, Constant 2024 Dollars

NMAAHC Construction Cost	Potential Difference	Potential Estimate New Museum \$Million	Potential \$/SF
\$702 Million	30%	\$913	\$2,291
\$1,763/SF	35%	\$948	\$2,379
Approximately	40%	\$983	\$2,468
400,000 Sq. Ft.	45%	\$1,018	\$2,556
	50%	\$1,053	\$2,644

Sources: CRS calculations based on data reported in Smithsonian Institution, *Budget Justifications for Fiscal Year 1991*, February 1990, p. 289; Lynette Clemetson, “Bush Authorizes a Black History Museum,” *The New York Times*, December 17, 2003, p. A34; Smithsonian Institution, “National Museum of the American Indian Architecture Fact Sheet,” July 2014; Smithsonian Institution, “National Museum of African American History and Culture: Design and Construction,” September 1, 2016; and Lonnie G. Bunch III, *A Fool’s Errand: Creating the National Museum of African American History and Culture in the Age of Bush, Obama, and Trump* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2019), p. 49.

Notes: “\$/SF” denotes cost per square foot. The range of potential estimated costs of construction of a new Smithsonian museum provided here are based on the results of analysis of the final stated costs of construction for the NMAAHC, and differences between initial cost estimates and stated final costs for the NMAI and NMAAHC, provided in constant 2024 dollars. The center point of the range of potential initial cost estimates is based on the average difference between initial estimates and final costs of the NMAI (43%) and NMAAHC (38%), or 40.5%, with potential estimates in increments of 5% and 10% above and below the average difference. This cost-estimating model is but one of many potential methods of estimating potential museum construction costs. Models based on different initial estimates, or cost data based on plans that vary from the planning assumptions and cost estimates for the NMAAHC, could result in different estimates of costs.

Ongoing Operational Costs

In congressional testimony, Secretary Bunch stated that

It’s also important to note that the costs do not end with construction. The annual operation costs of a museum alone are significant, but the true costs are spread throughout the Institution.... We must also consider our intellectual capacity. We cannot let additional

¹⁰ Written Statement of Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution Lonnie G. Bunch III, in U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on House Administration, *Oversight of the Smithsonian Institution: Opportunities for Growth by Honoring Latino Americans and Asian Pacific Americans*, hearings, 116th Cong., 2nd sess., February 5, 2020, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/HA/HA00/20200205/110437/HHRG-116-HA00-Wstate-BunchL-20200205-U1.pdf>.

museums detract from our ability to appropriately staff and support the work of all of our museums, galleries, and central support units.¹¹

Table 4 provides the direct, annual appropriations for the first 15 years the NMAI and the NMAAHC were in operation, as well as appropriations for the federal component of museum planning, design, construction, and exhibit development, in constant 2024 dollars. Overall costs of any potential museums could vary according to the scope of a new museum’s mandate, including any federal share in construction or operating costs; size and siting of a new museum facility; whether a new museum is fit into existing structures or requires new facilities to be built; fundraising; and Smithsonian accounting for support costs, among other factors.

Table 4. NMAI and NMAAHC: Appropriations for Construction and Operational Costs for the First 15 Years of Operations

Constant 2024 Dollars, Millions

NMAI	Amount	NMAAHC	Amount
FY1989-FY2003 Operations	\$396.14	FY2006-FY2020 Operations	\$435.25
Appropriations, Museum Planning, Design, Construction, Exhibits	\$293.58	Appropriations, Museum Planning, Design, Construction, Exhibits	\$351.15
Appropriations, First 15 Years	\$689.71	Appropriations, First 15 Years	\$786.41

Sources: Enacted appropriations data taken from Smithsonian annual budget requests, CRS calculations.

Notes: Data provided in millions of constant 2024 dollars. NMAI construction costs are based on the costs of three facilities, including a museum on the National Mall, for which Congress agreed to appropriate two-thirds of costs, \$168.6 million; a second museum in New York, for which Congress agreed to appropriate one-third of the costs, \$19.88 million; and a museum service center in Suitland, MD, to house NMAI collections, for which Congress appears to have provided the bulk of funds, \$105.8 million. NMAAHC constructions costs are based on its National Mall museum building.

New and Existing Museums Joining the Smithsonian

With planning underway for the siting and construction of the NMAL and SAWHM buildings, there is ongoing interest in expanding the number and scope of Smithsonian museums. P.L. 117-140 established the Commission to Study the Potential Creation of a National Museum of Asian Pacific American History and Culture in 2022. The commission’s responsibilities include consideration of the establishment of a new museum and, if a new museum is recommended, whether to place it in the Smithsonian. H.R. 6102, introduced in the 118th Congress (2023-2024), would establish a commission to study the potential creation of a national museum of American LGBTQI+ history and culture.

On occasion, the Smithsonian and Members of Congress reportedly receive requests for an existing museum to become a part of the Smithsonian. H.R. 7764 and S. 4001 (118th Congress) would establish a commission to study the potential transfer of the Weitzman National Museum

¹¹ Written Statement of Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution Lonnie G. Bunch III, in U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on House Administration, *Oversight of the Smithsonian Institution: Opportunities for Growth by Honoring Latino Americans and Asian Pacific Americans*, hearings, 116th Cong., 2nd sess., February 5, 2020, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/HA/HA00/20200205/110437/HHRG-116-HA00-Wstate-BunchL-20200205-U1.pdf>.

of American Jewish History in Philadelphia to the Smithsonian. Summaries of selected Smithsonian-related legislation introduced in the 118th Congress are available in CRS In Focus IF12719, *Smithsonian Institution: Selected Legislation, 118th Congress*, by R. Eric Petersen.

The reasons for considering whether and how to expand museum offerings may vary, and Congress might consider a range of questions regarding potential integration of new or existing museums. These might range from broad considerations to practical, detailed operational concerns. Some are likely to apply to any museum project, whereas others might be specific to a particular proposal, the context of Smithsonian operations, or the differences between establishing a new museum or acquiring an existing one. Some questions lend themselves to exploration of how Congress might consider museum development efforts as representations of specific social, cultural, or policy ideals and aspirations, while others might necessitate consideration of readily available data and other information to address technical, practical, institutional, or policy concerns. As with many of the questions Congress considers, the topics do not lend themselves to neat, mutually exclusive categorization. Regarding incorporation of existing museums or the development of new museums and Smithsonian operations, questions Congress could consider might include concerns in the following areas:

- broad considerations;
- the role and availability of private entities to support the new museums and their development;
- the Smithsonian's capacity to address new and ongoing institutional challenges; and
- potential costs of the new museums.

Broad Considerations

Whether posed explicitly or implicitly, any proposal related to acquisition of existing museums, or development of new museums, or to potential exhibits within them, arguably must provide answers to questions Congress might consider to inform its deliberative, legislative, and oversight efforts:

- What is the nature of museums in the contemporary context?
- To what extent, if any, are new museums similar or different from current Smithsonian museums?
- What are the potential policy, fiscal, and physical consequences of modern museum design, subject matter, and exhibition?
- What is the role of future and current museums in addressing and advancing American stories and accomplishments from multiple perspectives, including those that have arguably been less well represented in the past?
- How might an existing museum be integrated into the Smithsonian?
- How might operational concerns for integrating an existing museum differ from those for establishing a new museum?
- What is the capacity of the National Mall when considering the siting of potential museums?
- How might Congress guide and oversee these efforts?

Role and Availability of Private Entities

Based on the development of the four most recent Smithsonian museums—the NMAL, SAWHM, NMAAHC, and NMAI—initial proposals for museums typically grow from the engaged and sustained efforts of private individuals or groups. For example, in 1896, George Gustav Heye, a private collector, began collecting Native American items. Today, some elements of the Heye collection are retained by the Smithsonian and displayed in part at the NMAI’s Washington, DC, museum and at the NMAI’s George Gustav Heye Center in New York. Similarly, in 1915, African American Civil War veterans convened a memorial association to create a permanent memorial and construct a building depicting African American contributions in all walks of life.¹² While that goal was not specifically realized, the group’s efforts and stories were eventually included in the NMAAHC.

Based on the development of the NMAI and NMAAHC, and consideration of efforts that led to the establishment of the SAWHM and NMAL, it would appear that a series of events in museum development frequently occurs. These steps might include many or all of the following:

- initial, nonlegislative efforts raising the idea of a museum or establishing one,
- initial legislative proposals for a museum study commission,
- enactment of legislation to create a commission or commissions,
- initial legislative proposals to create a museum,
- enactment of legislation to create a museum,
- site consultation,
- site selection,
- museum building planning, design, and construction funding,
- groundbreaking, and
- museum opening.

Substantial periods of time can elapse between events; from the time George Heye began his collection until the NMAI opened its doors, 108 years had passed. Similarly, the NMAAHC opened 101 years after the first efforts of the African American Civil War veterans to establish and build a monument or museum. In both cases, consideration of new museums advanced only when engaged, well-organized private citizens and entities expressed sustained interest and concern to public officials. With that in mind, Congress might consider the following questions regarding private entities and their efforts to support the development of the new museums or incorporate existing museums into the Smithsonian:

- What is the commitment and capacity of advocates for the existing or new museums (as well as any proposals for additional new museums that Congress might consider) to work independently and effectively in support of museum establishment?
- How might those groups successfully partner with the Smithsonian?
- How robust are private museum entities? What are their plans to raise funds, awareness, and provide other support through various periods of the museum development process, and to what extent can those entities engage over a potentially extended period of time?

¹² Lonnie G. Bunch III, *A Fool’s Errand: Creating the National Museum of African American History and Culture in the Age of Bush, Obama, and Trump* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2019), p. 5.

- What might Congress do to assess the viability of private proposals and their proponents?

A timeline showing when the NMAI, the NMAAHC, the SAWHM, the NMAL, and P.L. 117-140, which authorized the Commission to Study the Potential Creation of a National Museum of Asian Pacific American History and Culture, completed various steps in the process of museum development is provided in **Table 5**. The historical account of the development of existing museums is not intended to be predictive of the potential timing of the NMAL or SAWHM, or the potential development or acquisition of any museums in the future.

Table 5. Selected Events in the Development of Smithsonian Museums and Potential Proposed Museums

Entity, Event	NMAI		NMAAHC		SAWHM		NMAL		Asian Pacific Commission	
	Year	Years Total	Year	Years Total	Year	Years Total	Year	Years Total	Year	Years Total
First Nonlegislative Efforts	1896		1915		1995		1994		1997	
Private Museum	1916	20	N/A		N/A		N/A		N/A	
Legislation, Commission	N/A		1916	1	1998	3	2003	9	2015	19
Enacted Study/Commission	N/A		1929	14	2014	19	2008	14	2022	25
Second Commission Enacted	N/A		2001	86	N/A		N/A		N/A	
Commission Report Issued	N/A		2003	88	2016	21	2011	17	N/A	
Legislation, Museum Creation	1911	15	1916	1	2003	8	2011	17	2015	
Enacted Museum Creation	1989	93	2003	88	2020	25	2020	26	N/A	
Site Selection	1989	93	2004	89	2022	27	2022	28	N/A	
Groundbreaking	1999	103	2012	97	N/A		N/A		N/A	
Opening	2004	108	2016	101	N/A	Pending 29	N/A	Pending 28	N/A	Pending 26

Sources: NMAI: P.L. 101-185; H.R. 16313, S. 3953, 62nd Congress; “General History,” National Museum of the American Indian, <https://siarchives.si.edu/history/national-museum-american-indian>; and Smithsonian Archives, “George Gustav Heye Starts Indian Collection,” https://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris_sic_2202.

NMAAHC: P.L. 107-106; P.L. 108-184; Pub. Res. No. 107, March 4, 1929; H.R. 18721, 64th Congress; National Museum of African American History and Culture: Plan For Action Presidential Commission, *The Time Has Come: Report to the President and to the Congress*, Washington, DC, April 2, 2003, p. 1; and Lonnie G. Bunch III, *A Fool’s Errand: Creating the National Museum of African American History and Culture in the Age of Bush, Obama, and Trump* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2019).

SAWHM: P.L. 116-260; P.L. 113-291; H.R. 4722, 105th Congress; S. 1741, 108th Congress; H.R. 1980, 116th Congress; Smithsonian Institution, “Smithsonian Identifies Two Optimal Sites for New Museums,” press release, October 27, 2022, <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/releases/smithsonian-identifies-two-optimal-sites-new-museums>; Commission to Study the Potential Creation of a National Women’s History Museum, *The American Museum of Women’s History: Congressional Commission Report to the President of the United States and Congress*, November 16, 2016, p. 8, http://amwh.us/report/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/AWMH_11_07_16_Digital.pdf; and Karen Staser, “From the Crypt to the Capitol Rotunda: The Creation of NWHM, National Women’s History Museum,” National Women’s History Museum, <https://www.womenshistory.org/crypt-capitol-rotunda>.

NMAL: P.L. 116-260; P.L. 110-229; H.R. 3292, 108th Congress; Smithsonian Institution, “Smithsonian Identifies Two Optimal Sites for New Museums,” press release, October 27, 2022, <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/releases/smithsonian-identifies-two-optimal-sites-new-museums>; Friends of the National Museum of the American Latino, <https://americanlatinomuseum.org/presente/>; Smithsonian Institution Task Force on Latino Issues, *Willful Neglect: The Smithsonian Institution and U.S. Latinos*, May 1994, p. 2.

Commission to Study the Potential Creation of a National Museum of Asian Pacific American

History and Culture: P.L. 117-140; and Smithsonian Institution, “Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center,” January 1, 2018, <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/factsheets/smithsonian-asian-pacific-american-center>.

Smithsonian Capacity Questions

The establishment or acquisition of new Smithsonian museums necessarily raises questions about capacity. Some elements of capacity might focus on several Smithsonian operational and physical plant issues. These include matters surrounding Smithsonian engagement of new or existing museum development in the context of competing priorities, the challenges of museum siting, and meeting the short- and long-term costs associated with museums.

Secretary Bunch has addressed concerns about certain capacities in at least two congressional hearings. In 2019 testimony before the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, he emphasized the need to continue reducing a substantial backlog of maintenance issues in Smithsonian facilities, and that “a new museum would need funds for both the creation and long-term operations of the facilities, the care and preservation of our collections, and the on-going success of the museum.”¹³ In testimony regarding the establishment of the SAWHM and NMAL before the Committee on House Administration in 2020, Dr. Bunch, who served as founding director of NMAAHC before being chosen as secretary of the Smithsonian, stated

Any new museum must meet the expectations the public has for a national museum. This means an appropriate size, programming, and collections. We must contemplate the needs of housing staff and collections for a museum and determine if those needs can be met on site. There must also be a suitable location for a new museum. These buildings are powerful symbols of how we, as a nation, value the contributions of the people they represent.¹⁴

The need for the Smithsonian to oversee establishment or acquisition of new museums could necessitate congressional assessment of the new or existing museums’ fundraising efforts; the Smithsonian’s siting, design, construction, and operational plans or cost decisions; and the potential implications those actions might have on ongoing Smithsonian operations and facilities. Of broader potential oversight concern is the extent to which the Smithsonian Institution has the capacity to integrate the new or existing museums into its portfolio, and consideration of the Smithsonian’s capacity and commitment to new or existing museums considered in the context of its other, ongoing organizational commitments.

In light of these concerns, Congress might consider the following questions:

- How might the establishment of new or existing museums fit into existing Smithsonian leadership priorities, competing demands on staff and resources, or congressional direction?
- What is the capacity of the Smithsonian to balance the following:
 - The long-term maintenance challenges across the Smithsonian’s facilities?
 - Collection storage, digitization, and protection?
 - The development of new collections storage facilities?

¹³ Written Statement of Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution Lonnie G. Bunch III, before U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, *Annual Oversight Hearing of the Smithsonian Institution*, 116th Cong., 1st sess., November 14, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/116/chr/CHRG-116shrg38797/CHRG-116shrg38797.pdf>.

¹⁴ Written Statement of Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution Lonnie G. Bunch III, in U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on House Administration, *Oversight of the Smithsonian Institution: Opportunities for Growth by Honoring Latino Americans and Asian Pacific Americans*, hearings, 116th Cong., 2nd sess., February 5, 2020, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/HA/HA00/20200205/110437/HHRG-116-HA00-Wstate-BunchL-20200205-U1.pdf>.

- The vitality and currency of existing museums and exhibits as the Smithsonian also addresses the challenges of establishing the new, or incorporating existing, museums?
- How might the new or acquired museums affect current arrangements between and among existing museums?
- How might the Smithsonian identify senior leaders to oversee the development and integration of new or newly acquired museums?
- What plans might Congress want the Smithsonian to consider to ensure that established Smithsonian museums and new museums or newly acquired museums avoid competing for collections, exhibits, staff, or other resources?

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Acknowledgments

Carol Wilson, Senior Research Librarian, and Julie Jennings, formerly a Senior Research Librarian, provided extensive research assistance.

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