

U.S. COMMISSION OF FINE ARTS

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14 September 2022

Dear Secretary Bunch:

As you know, the Smithsonian Institution and its consultant team have been engaged for many months in a site selection study for two new museums, the National Museum of the American Latino and the American Women's History Museum; the study was presented to the Commission of Fine Arts in March and July of this year, and it is again to be reviewed at its public meeting tomorrow on 15 September. This letter responds to your request for comment by the Chair of the Commission of Fine Arts in accordance with the authorizing legislation.

The Commission of Fine Arts is disappointed to find that the Smithsonian, despite its need to identify two viable sites, continues to carry forward alternatives that are highly problematic or unrealistic, and that it has not chosen to study other options as recommended by the Commission and by other government and regulatory groups. At its public meetings in March and July, the Commission raised significant issues with several of the sites—most notably the Washington Monument site for its small size and constraining setbacks; the Tidal Basin site for its incompatibility with centuries of planning for the monumental core of the city; and the Northwest Capitol Grounds site for its jurisdictional, security, and infrastructure issues—and strongly recommended the study of other existing building sites to accommodate these new museums.

Instead, as in the presentation in July, the same four alternatives will again be presented tomorrow as focus sites; there appears to be no further investigation has been undertaken to address the Commission's recommendations to study the Whitten Building, the Forrestal complex, the FBI headquarters site, or any other similar properties that could accommodate the museums. The only new information provided for tomorrow's review concerns the capacity of each of the four sites to accommodate the estimated program of 350,000 s.f. of exhibit, public use, and support space for a museum similar in typology to the National Museum of the American Indian and the National Museum of African American History and Culture. The studies illustrate the shortcomings of each site—most dramatically at the Monument site, which would require excessive height, excavation, and setback violations to accommodate the program.

As noted in its reviews of the study in March and July, the CFA's advice has been consistent: that most of the focus sites are highly problematic, and that there is a great opportunity for the Smithsonian to take advantage of existing federal properties to create a new context for these national museums. Specifically, the CFA has strongly recommended consideration of the Whitten Building of the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a good opportunity for redevelopment, as well as suggesting the FBI site, the Forrestal complex of the U.S. Department of Energy, and others. We understand that the General Services Administration—owner of most of the properties in question—supports this general strategy to consider existing buildings. In addition, the recent Congressional action to authorize the study the establishment of the National Museum of Asian Pacific American History and Culture emphasizes the necessity and opportunity for a longer-term, comprehensive solution for siting new museums, rather than addressing each proposal individually.

Consistent with comments being provided by NCPG and the District of Columbia Government, the Commission of Fine Arts strongly urges consideration of the redevelopment of the Forrestal

complex, directly to the south of the Smithsonian Castle, as a location for multiple new museums for various compelling reasons. While not located directly on the Mall, the parcel offers the following:

- 1) It is a highly honorific setting, with axial views to both the Castle and the U.S. Capitol;
- 2) It could accommodate up to 2 million square feet, enough for three or more museums;
- 3) It is located very close to the Smithsonian Metrorail station, and it would be easy to provide access and service from surrounding streets;
- 4) It enjoys close proximity to the heart of the Smithsonian complex, immediately across Independence Avenue, and would allow for shared services below grade, connecting to the existing museum campus centered on the Haupt Garden;
- 5) Its development would repair the damage to the city's fabric made by 1960s urban renewal and could reinforce the urban connection from the Mall to the highly successful Southwest waterfront;
- 6) Its reuse as a cultural precinct is consistent with more than a decade of planning for central Washington, including the CFA-sponsored *Monumental Core Framework Plan* and its follow-on study, the *Southwest Ecodistrict Plan*, both led by NCPC.

In summary, the site is strategically outstanding; its principal shortcoming is its lack of direct presence on the Mall itself—but it is unlikely that three additional sites to accommodate all of these new museums can be found on the Mall in any case. Instead, with a cluster of new museums being authorized, the Smithsonian has the opportunity to expand the existing cultural node centered on its iconic Castle building into a cultural district along 10th Street, SW—thereby creating a new context for its growing family of museums.

We hope the Smithsonian leadership will consider this advice deeply and seriously, as representing a generational opportunity for visionary leadership in shaping the fabric of the capital city.

Sincerely,



Billie Tsien, Chair

Lonnie Bunch III, Secretary
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cc: Marcel Acosta, Executive Director, National Capital Planning Commission
Robin Carnahan, Administrator, General Services Administration
Kym Hall, Area Director, Region 1–National Capital Area, National Park Service
Anita Cozart, Interim Planning Director, District of Columbia Government

Encl: CFA letter to Smithsonian Institution dated 28 July 2022
CFA letter to Smithsonian Institution dated 24 March 2022