

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 18, 2014

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Senate Minority Leader  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C.

Dear Senator McConnell:

We are requesting to be consulted before the Senate enters into any unanimous consent agreements or time limitations regarding S.398/H.R.863, Commission to Study the Potential Creation of a National Women's History Museum Act of 2013.

The establishment of a national women's museum is certainly a laudable undertaking, but we are concerned this bill could expose taxpayers to millions of dollars in potential future costs at a time when the federal government is \$17 trillion in debt.

If the private entity currently supporting the National Women's History Museum would like to establish a commission to further study the need for their museum, they are welcome to do so without the assistance of the federal government or Congress.

The bill states that no federal funds may be obligated to carry out the creation or responsibilities of the commission. However, the legislation leaves open the possibility for federal funds to be used for the construction, operation, and maintenance of the museum. Even more, the legislation clearly directs the commission to consider possible entry for the museum into the Smithsonian system.

According to an article in *Roll Call*, the President and CEO of the National Women's History Museum (NWHM), Joan Wages, estimated "Construction would likely cost \$400 million to \$500 million, with an annual operating cost of almost \$20 million."<sup>1</sup> However, NWHM has only raised \$12 million to support the effort.<sup>2</sup>

As noted, several provisions in the legislation clearly point to the intent the museum should be a part of the Smithsonian Institute and should be located on public land. The

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<sup>1</sup> Hess, Hannah, "House Administration Explores Creation of Women's History Museum," *Roll Call*, December 11, 2013, [http://www.rollcall.com/news/house\\_administration\\_explores\\_creation\\_of\\_womens\\_history\\_museum-229627-1.html](http://www.rollcall.com/news/house_administration_explores_creation_of_womens_history_museum-229627-1.html).

<sup>2</sup> Hess, Hannah, "Maloney Hopes Reagan Commission Blueprint Could Breathe New Life Into National Women's History Museum," *Roll Call*, May 7, 2014, <http://blogs.rollcall.com/hill-blotter/can-ronald-reagan-breathe-new-life-into-national-womens-history-museum/?dcz=>.

commission is required to report on “whether the museum should be a part of the Smithsonian Institution,” and the NWHM has expressed a strong interest in building on federal land. Further, despite the mention the museum should be paid for with private funding, the Commission’s report must be sent to the House and Senate Appropriations Committees. While the commission is required to be privately funded, it is clear advocates have no such intention the museum will be built and operated solely with funding from private supporters. If only private funds are intended for its use, there is little need for a congressionally mandated commission.

The Smithsonian Institution already faces numerous challenges, including maintaining current collections and managing the construction of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). The Inspector General of the Smithsonian Institute included “construction management” of the NMAAHC, and “collections stewardship” of the Smithsonian’s current collections as top management issues for 2013.<sup>3</sup> Testifying before Congress, Mark L. Goldstein, Director of Physical Infrastructure Issues at the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said they “and others have documented significant governance and accountability breakdowns at the Smithsonian, which could result in a lack of trust from donors, grantors, and appropriators and ultimately put funding and the organization’s credibility at risk.”<sup>4</sup> The addition of a new museum to the Smithsonian Institution could exacerbate these challenges.

Museums receiving federal funding located in the nation’s capital and across the country already house collections recognizing the contributions of women to math, science, arts, and gender equality. For example, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History and Air and Space Museum both located on the National Mall house collections on women mathematicians, the women’s suffrage movement, an exhibition on the Girl Scouts from 1912-2012, information on women in aviation and space history, and dozens of other collections and exhibits dedicated to recognizing the significant contributions of women to our nation. Further, the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., which has received over one million in federal grants, “directly addresses the gender imbalance in the presentation of art in the U.S. and abroad, thus assuring great women artists a place of honor now and in the future.”<sup>5</sup> Another prominent women’s museum is the Sewall-Belmont House & Museum, located in the heart of Washington, mere blocks from the Capitol. According to its website, the Sewall-Belmont House & Museum “tells the compelling story of a community of women who dedicated their lives to the fight for women’s rights. The innovative tactics and strategies these women devised became the blueprint for women’s progress throughout the twentieth century.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Top Management Challenges Report for 2013,” Smithsonian Institution: Office of the Inspector General, November 13, 2013, <http://www.si.edu/Content/OIG/Misc/TMC2013.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> GAO-10-29TT, “Smithsonian Institution: Governance and Facilities Reforms Progressing, but Work Remains,” U.S. Government Accountability Office, December 10, 2009, <http://www.gao.gov/assets/130/123874.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> “About,” National Museum of Women in the Arts, <http://www.nmwa.org/about>.

<sup>6</sup> Overview, Sewall-Belmont House & Museum, <http://www.sewallbelmont.org/learn/overview/>.

We are grateful for the significant contributions of women throughout our history and appreciate the numerous museums dedicated to telling these stories. As a private citizens, we would gladly lend my support to such an effort, however this is simply not the role of Congress.

At a time when we face a crushing national debt of more than \$17 trillion, it is simply not the appropriate role of this Congress to approve legislation with the potential to put taxpayers on the hook for millions of dollars to build and maintain a new museum. In an effort to honor women for their contributions, Congress must remember the current and future generations of women who will have to pay back our national debt.

Again, thank you for protecting our rights regarding S.398/H.R.863, Commission to Study the Potential Creation of a National Women's History Museum Act of 2013.

Sincerely,



Tom Coburn, M.D.  
U.S. Senator



Mike Lee  
U.S. Senator