

# *House Votes to Create a National Museum of the American Latino*

Plans for a museum devoted to the history and contributions of Latinos in the United States began forming in the 2000s, but legislation had not gained traction in Congress until now.

By **Julia Jacobs**

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Supporters of a National Museum of the American Latino are the closest they have ever been to gaining a spot on the National Mall.

On Monday, the House passed a bill to establish such a museum within the Smithsonian, delivering a significant victory to a yearslong effort to build an institution devoted to the history and contributions of Latino Americans.

Legislation establishing such a museum was first introduced in 2011, but this was the first time it secured House approval, and it did so by voice vote with bipartisan support.

Prospects for a Senate version of the bill are unclear, but its Republican lead sponsor, Senator John Cornyn of Texas, said that he hopes that the chamber will be able to make the museum a reality.

In the past, the proposal has met with opposition from legislators concerned about budget pressures who said the Smithsonian should focus on improving the museums that it already had.

But Latino activists, artists and legislators gained traction in Congress at a time when President Trump's standing with Hispanics remains low after his inflammatory remarks about, and efforts to curb, immigration from Central and South America.

In the House chamber on Monday, Democratic legislators gestured toward that rhetoric as one reason for the necessity of a National Museum of the American Latino.

"Our community has been used as scapegoats for the problems that America faces," Representative Tony Cárdenas, a Democrat from California, said on the House floor. "The American people deserve to learn the truth of our history and our heritage."

The effort to establish the museum dates back to 1994, when a report found that the Smithsonian "displays a pattern of willful neglect toward the estimated 25 million Latinos in the United States," noting that the institution had no museum or permanent exhibition that features Hispanic-American art, culture or history.

(That figure has more than doubled. In 2017, there were nearly 60 million Latinos in the United States, equaling about 18 percent of the total population, according to Pew Research Center.)

The report, issued by a 15-member task force that was appointed by the Smithsonian's secretary himself, cited how few Hispanics had roles in the Smithsonian's top management or were featured in the "notable Americans" section of the National Portrait Gallery.

Three years later, the Smithsonian Latino Center was created to ensure that the contributions of the demographic were represented throughout the museum system.

But despite calls for a museum dedicated entirely to Latino Americans, it wasn't until 2008 that Congress passed legislation authorizing a commission to plot out the specifics.

At the time, the National Museum of the American Indian had recently opened and the National Museum of African American History and Culture was in the works, contributing to an unwillingness in Washington to offer the same level of federal funding to another new museum.

The report by the commission, released in 2011, proposed a 310,000-square-foot building, roughly the same size as the African-American museum, that would be situated prominently on the National Mall. It assured legislators that the museum would need no federal appropriations in the first six years after it was established, relying instead on private funding. The report estimated that the project would cost \$600 million and set a private fund-raising goal of \$300 million. The commission identified possible locations on the National Mall where the museum could be constructed, but nothing has been finalized.

The plan that was passed in the House bill on Monday, however, involved the government providing funds to reach 50 percent of the money needed for the design and construction of the museum, the same financial model that was used for the African-American museum. (The government paid for two-thirds of the American Indian museum.)

Henry R. Muñoz III, who chaired the commission and was chair of the Smithsonian Latino Center, said that the success of those museums has shown that the funding model worked and should be replicated for the Latino museum.

Legislators from both parties celebrated the passage of the bill as a milestone for the effort; in particular, the bill's lead sponsor on the Democratic side, Representative José E. Serrano of New York, who is nearing retirement, framed it as a sort of capstone on his 30-year career in the House, urging the Senate to "finish the job."

In a statement, Senator Cornyn, the lead sponsor of the legislation in the Senate, said that "I look forward to making that a reality."

Congressional approval would be an important step for the museum, but the road ahead remains long if the process unfolds as it did in the case of the Museum of African American History and Culture. The legislation establishing the museum and the council that would shepherd its creation passed in 2003. The building itself opened in 2016.

"This is far from over and it will take many years," Mr. Muñoz said. "But I think that this is a recognition of the importance of our community to the building of this country."