

Where Is the Smithsonian Museum for American Latinos?

Our stories still don't have a permanent home in our nation's capital.

By Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Ken Salazar

Ms. Ros-Lehtinen and Mr. Salazar are advocates for the National Museum of the American Latino Act in the House of Representatives.

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The National Mall in Washington is where we inaugurate presidents, march for change and learn about America's history at monuments and the Smithsonian Institution museums. And yet, even as Latinos have helped shape this great nation, our stories don't have a permanent home in our nation's capital.

In 1994, a task force outlined the ways in which the Smithsonian “almost entirely excludes and ignores Latinos in nearly every aspect of its operations.” Its report, “Willful Neglect,” offered 10 recommendations for improvement, including that it should support the development of a museum on the National Mall dedicated to honoring and preserving over 500 years of American Latino history and culture.

It wasn't until a decade later, in 2003, that community, business and congressional leaders began working with advocates like the Friends of the American Latino Museum to establish just such a Smithsonian museum. They intend for it to complement the others, such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the National Museum of the American Indian.

The African American Museum demonstrates just how powerful, and necessary, monuments to all aspects of our history are. In its first two years, over three million people visited. The museum illustrates how the Black experience is a quintessential American story. It also shows that a public-private partnership in funding a museum can be enormously successful — and it's the same model outlined in recently passed federal legislation for a National American Latino Museum.

Latinos are an integral part of the country's economy and prosperity. They work in industries considered essential like meatpacking, poultry, health and elder care services that are among the major reasons Latinos have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. They have served in our nation's military, from the Revolutionary War to the present day. They are also innovators, entrepreneurs and political leaders who have championed civil rights and defined public policy.



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Too often, these stories are absent from our history books, classrooms and museums. When we don't have a full picture of our history, we lose sight of our nation's identity. A museum dedicated to American Latino history and culture would recognize the generations of Latinos and Latinas who have contributed to this country, and broaden our understanding of what 21st-century America looks like.

The need for this museum cannot be overstated, particularly now. Latinos are the second-largest ethnic and racial group in the country, and yet our diversity and complexity remains misunderstood. This year's presidential election highlighted the significant role that Latino voters play in our democracy and every other aspect of the nation's collective well-being. As pundits try to wrap their minds around the Latino vote, we are reminded that it is through our stories and shared experiences that Americans better understand one another and, ideally, come together.

In 2005, we wrote and co-sponsored the National Museum of the American Latino Act, in the House of Representatives and the Senate, with then-Representative Xavier Becerra, now the attorney general of California, and former Senator Mel Martinez. The act would establish the first-ever national museum of American Latino history.

On July 27, the House of Representatives passed the bill by a unanimous voice vote, with a supermajority of 295 bipartisan co-sponsors. We now stand at a critical moment in our journey.

In the closing weeks of this Congress, the Senate has teed up a golden opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to valuing and accurately representing American history by moving the National American Latino Museum Act out of their chamber and to the president's desk, with a committee hearing scheduled on Tuesday.

We now have a chance to bring the nation together by shedding light on our shared American story. It's far past time to do the right thing, and make an American Latino Museum a reality.

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Secretary Ken Salazar (@KenSalazar), a former secretary of the interior in the Obama Administration, is a former Colorado senator. He oversaw the National Museum of the American Latino Commission from 2008 to 2011.

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