

Please Sign In and use this article's on page print button to print this article.

COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE

Arts commission pans Smithsonian's selection of sites for American Latino, Women's museums



The Department of Energy's Forrester complex at 1000 Independence Ave SW is among the sites the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts believes the Smithsonian Institution should consider as the location for two new museums.

JOANNE S. LAWTON



By Daniel J. Sernovitz
Senior Staff Reporter, Washington Business Journal
Sep 15, 2022

Members of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts on Thursday urged representatives of the Smithsonian Institution to rethink their preferred locations for the proposed National Museum of the American Latino and the American Women's History Museum as they get closer to making a decision.

From an original pool of 26, the Smithsonian has come up with a short list of four sites for the museums and it is

expected to present its findings to its governing board of regents next month.

At a hearing Thursday, members of the CFA criticized the choices, saying that that a trio of federally owned properties – including the Department of Energy's current headquarters – that did not make the cut should have been given greater consideration. The commission also said that three of the four sites selected are "highly problematic or unrealistic" due to space constraints and other issues, per a letter from the commission's chair to the head of the Smithsonian. Several commissioners echoed those concerns Thursday, saying the Smithsonian is taking too piecemeal an approach to shaping the look and feel of the Mall and urged it to step back and consider the larger landscape.

"There was a very clear interest for many different reasons to also see those sites have been evaluated in an even hand so that that information can go forward to your regents, but also to all of the various partners and public that would be involved in this process," CFA member Justin Garrett Moore said at the hearing. "I want to express a disappointment that that work hasn't been done."

Thursday's hearing was the next step in a process kicked off in December 2020, when Congress passed legislation authorizing both museums and requiring decisions on where to locate them by the end of 2022.

The four sites selected by the Smithsonian are the Arts and Industries Building at 900 Jefferson Drive SW and three undeveloped parcels; one near the Capitol Reflecting Pool, another on Jefferson Drive across from the Smithsonian's

UPGRADE TO

NATIONWIDE ACCESS

**Get Industry Insights
From 45+ Major Cities**

PLUS ACCESS EVERY
STORY FROM EVERY
NEWSROOM

UPGRADE MY MEMBERSHIP

National Museum of African American History and Culture and a third near the Tidal Basin.

Kevin Gover, under secretary for museums and culture at the Smithsonian, told the commission Thursday the other sites that met the criteria established by Congress have not been eliminated. Rather, the Smithsonian has chosen four for greater consideration based on a set of weighted factors including location, cost, and development complexity.

Gover said he agrees with many of the concerns the CFA has raised about its process and that a site like the Department of Energy's Forrestal complex would meet some of the criteria established for the proposed museums. At the same time, he said the institution is up against a tight timeline and that redeveloping the site, which sits across Independence Avenue SW from the National Mall, is not a preferred option given time and cost constraints. He also said the museums, through their representatives, have expressed a desire to be located on the National Mall.

"What concerns us most with the site is the extraordinary cost of the redevelopment," Gover said. "Not so much to the Smithsonian" – though demolition and construction costs would be hefty – "but more tellingly, we think in excess of \$1 billion to relocate the Department of Energy from its current home."

The commission has called on the Smithsonian to consider the Forrestal complex for reasons including its development potential and its proximity to the Smithsonian Metro station, among other reasons. The Department of Agriculture's Whitten Building and the FBI's J. Edgar Hoover Building headquarters, which have also been looked at for other uses in the past, should also have been given more consideration, per the CFA, though all three are in active use by those agencies.

In a letter to Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie Bunch II Wednesday, CFA Chair Billie Tsien said she believes the Jefferson Drive parcel near the Washington Monument is too small to meet the requirements for a 350,000-square-foot museum space. She also said another by the Tidal Basin would be incompatible with planning around the District's monumental core and that the third near the U.S. Capitol has security and infrastructure concerns.

"I feel quite frustrated because I feel that this is a very piece-by-piece, museum-by-museum, constituency-by-constituency series of choices that has no overall sense of planning to it, and I would say that, for me, it is essentially lip service in terms of looking at the Whitten and Forrestal sites," Tsien said during Thursday's hearing. "While it does not sit on the Mall, it gives the possibility that there could be a larger sense of planning than simply responding to various constituencies, for various museums as they come up."

She acknowledged that the CFA is just one of several commissions asked to provide feedback and that the Smithsonian is under no obligation to heed its suggestions.

Moore echoed Tsien's concerns, and said he would prefer to see the Smithsonian step back and consider the broader landscape given the fixed area surrounding the Mall and need to find spots for other museums, such as the proposed National Museum of Asian Pacific American History and Culture, in the future.

Govan acknowledged some of the search criteria may be more subjective than objective, and he pledged to bring the CFA's concerns to the Smithsonian's board for its consideration.

"I also think that Commissioner Moore more makes a good point," he said. "The criteria are less than scientific, and any time you assign weights to things, there is a degree of subjectivity, of which we're aware and which the regents will be made aware so they can do their own evaluation."
