

# Smithsonian Picks Two Sites for Museums Honoring Latinos and Women

The Smithsonian board did not decide which museum will go where, and will not, until Congress approves the locations on the National Mall.

By Zachary Small

Oct. 27, 2022

The Smithsonian's Board of Regents said on Thursday that it had found two "optimal" locations for its new museums on the southwestern side of the National Mall, but legislative approval is just one of the hurdles still to be cleared before construction can begin on the National Museum of the American Latino or the American Women's History Museum.

For decades, advocates for new national institutions have fought to secure a position on the mall, where land is limited and often ribboned with rules that forbid construction.

The board did not specify which museum might go where, and it will not make that decision until Congress agrees to the sites and adopts legislation that allows construction to go forward.

Only one of the sites selected by the Smithsonian board directly fronts onto the mall's promenade. That plot is located directly across the promenade from the National Museum of African American History and Culture.



One of the sites selected is a vacant space directly across the mall's promenade from the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Shawn Thew/EPA, via Shutterstock

The second spot is a bit farther away, near the eastern shore of the Tidal Basin, and across from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

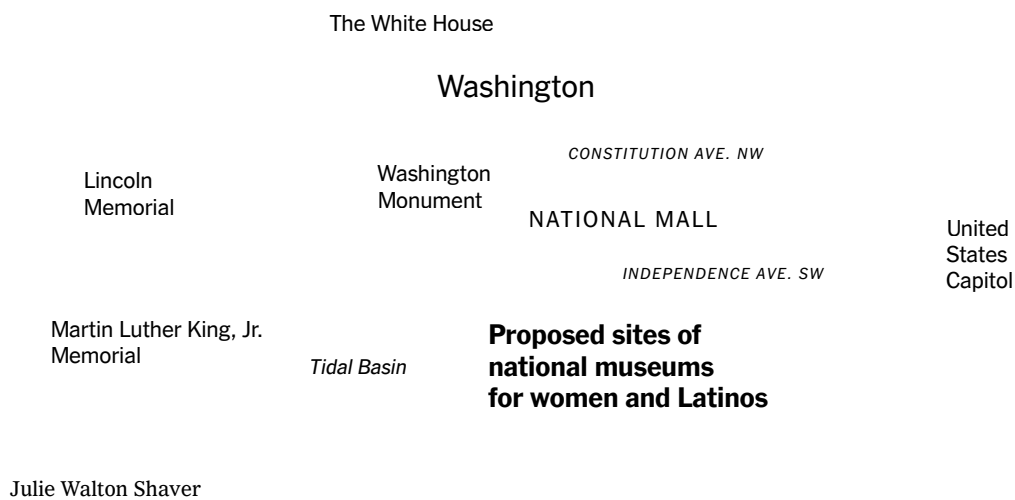
The distinctions between the two proposed locations, and the question of which museum would occupy each site, if approved, is likely to set off robust debate.

Pressure has been building over the past two years as the Smithsonian edges closer to its December deadline for officially selecting locations for the new museums.

Last month, members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus urged President Biden to say publicly that the National Museum of the American Latino should be built on the National Mall. “It’s time,” the president said only a day later, in a speech celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month, urging Congress to take action on both museums.

In May 2021, a nonprofit called Friends of the National Museum of the American Latino published an open letter telling the Smithsonian’s leaders that “any location beyond what Americans recognize as the National Mall will be a disservice to — not only the Latino community — but to every American.”

Estuardo Rodriguez, president and chief executive of the advocacy group, welcomed the recent announcement of two potential sites. “Both museums cannot go wrong in either location,” Rodriguez said in a phone interview, though he still believed that the American Latino museum was the best candidate for a spot directly on the mall promenade.



The secretary of the Smithsonian, Lonnie G. Bunch III, acknowledged that some people would be upset by the Tidal Basin location. “Proximity will trump disappointment, eventually,” he said in a phone interview. “I think the Smithsonian did a very thorough process in trying to balance constituent needs and the realities of construction.”

The announcement also brings an end to speculation that one of the new museums might be housed in the Arts and Industries Building, which reopened last year after a long renovation. The Smithsonian board also eliminated from consideration a site nearer to, and controlled by, the U.S. Capitol.

Ayers Saint Gross, an engineering and architecture firm, helped the Smithsonian narrow its search from more than 25 potential locations to just four in June. The culling process was based on criteria like site conditions, construction costs, public transportation and environmental factors.



The second site selected for a new national museum is a bit farther back from the mall promenade and closer to the Tidal Basin. Tom Brenner/Reuters

Supporters of both museums have long been working to build momentum for the new institutions. Last year, the Smithsonian named an advisory council for the Women’s History museum that includes the fashion designer Tory Burch, the tennis athlete Billie Jean King and the actor Rosario Dawson. The Museum of the American Latino has its own board including the actresses Sofía Vergara and Eva Longoria as well as the chef José Andrés.

Officials said that the biggest challenge now is getting Congress to approve the potential sites, which are both located in a no-build zone controlled by the National Park Service. Receiving approval might be tricky because of regulations around the land’s use, but finding a path forward is not impossible. Both the Museum of African American History and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial were granted exceptions to build in the reserve.

“The Board of Regents has been committed to meeting the December deadline Congress set for the selection of sites for these important new museums,” Steve Case, chairman of the Board of Regents, told The Washington Post. “We hope Congress will now consider legislation so we can move forward, as we seek to more fully showcase our collective American journey.”

Representative Carolyn B. Maloney, a Democrat of New York who sponsored the bipartisan bill establishing the women’s museum, said she was committed to supporting new legislation that would help the Smithsonian move forward with its plans.

“I am thrilled,” Maloney said in a statement. “The new museums will be vital additions to the Smithsonian that will allow us to tell a more complete story that recognizes the remarkable contributions of women and Latinos who have helped shape our nation.”