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# Government Must Move Quickly to Aid the Smithsonian

By Pablo Eisenberg

After the scandal that engulfed the Smithsonian over the past year, one might expect the museum complex to go out of its way to demonstrate that it is changing its management and governance and doing everything it can to ensure that it is run in a manner befitting the nation's most important cultural institution.

Instead, it continues to make missteps and is moving much too slowly to overhaul its operations. Congress and the White House are as much to blame as the organization's Board of Regents. Neither government officials nor trustees are demonstrating much vision or courage, making it unclear whether they grasp the seriousness of the troubles at the institution.

Among the latest concerns:

- The Smithsonian's acting secretary appointed a new chief executive of the National Museum of the American Indian without consulting many of the museum's trustees. This comes after Lawrence M. Small, who resigned under pressure in March as secretary of the Smithsonian, kept many board members in the dark about his personal spending and other activities.
- The House of Representatives last week renewed the term of Roger W. Sant as chairman of the executive committee of the Board of Regents, adding its approval to the Senate's similar action. That move sends a wrong message to the public about the institution's commitment to good governance and integrity. Mr. Sant was the person most responsible for making sure that the governing board was doing its job, and his failure to do so means he does not deserve a reappointment.
- A government study was released in September showing that the Smithsonian needs to spend at least \$2.5-billion on maintenance, renovation, and other facilities matters by 2013. The regents have asked for \$1-billion over 10 years for this purpose, but the White House asked Congress for only an additional \$44-million in this year's budget. Lawmakers now in the process of deciding federal spending have done little to show they recognize the urgency of the Smithsonian's needs or plan any significant spending increases.

The weak leadership of the organization became even clearer this month when *The Washington Post* reported that the Smithsonian's board has taken the unusual step of

putting on hold its plan to accept \$5-million from the American Petroleum Institute for a new project to showcase the oceans.

The decision to be careful about accepting corporate gifts that could jeopardize the integrity of the institution was a wise one, but it comes at the eleventh hour and seemingly only because of the potential for bad publicity. If the institution had gotten serious about reviewing its ethics policies, such potential for embarrassment would have been eliminated before the decision about whether to accept the money ever made its way to the board.

It is also a worrisome sign that the initial approval of the gift came from Cristián Samper, now the interim leader of the Smithsonian, when he was director of the National Museum of Natural History.

These recent blunders all show that neither the organization nor Congress has taken seriously the need to change the institution's culture of secrecy, alter its governance structure, and finance the enormous costs of the Smithsonian's projected construction and maintenance projects.

The recent appointment of the new director of the American Indian museum reflects the culture of secrecy that still permeates the Smithsonian.

At least eight of the trustees of the museum said they were not consulted about the selection of Kevin Gover as the new chief and were told that, in any case, responsibility for the appointment was solely that of the secretary of the Smithsonian.

The acting secretary of the Smithsonian, Mr. Samper, later sent the trustees an e-mail message saying he should have informed them about the candidate. "Oops, sorry," however, is not a satisfactory substitute for consultation and openness in the governance process.

A similar lack of openness has been demonstrated by an internal committee at the Smithsonian that is working on efforts to improve governance and accountability throughout the institution's 19 museums.

Apart from an interim report issued by the governance committee in June, we have heard nothing more. Nor does the public know what the governance committee is thinking or doing.

The minutes of its meetings have not been publicly available.

The Smithsonian has also been updating a "scorecard" on its Web site to show the progress that the institution is making in dealing with the recommendations made by an outside review committee after the scandal erupted over Mr. Small's leadership.

While that is a good step toward disclosing more information, the scorecard doesn't provide much information other than whether action on a recommendation has been completed or is on target for completion. Details about the process, the consultants being used, and the changes that have already been made are lacking.

The continued leadership of the board by Mr. Sant, the founder of a successful energy company and a generous philanthropist, is a sign that nobody is serious about a governance overhaul. The scandals happened on his watch, and if he did not realize that it is time to walk away, at least Congress or other Smithsonian regents should have opposed his renomination.

More important, little movement seems to have been made to ensure that the rest of the board is composed of people with the time and expertise to oversee the organization.

The vice president, the chief justice of the Supreme Court, and six members of Congress now serve on the board of the Smithsonian.

There is certainly no need for eight government representatives, since none of these officials have time to pay close attention to the needs of the Smithsonian, given their other responsibilities. Surely one or at most two members of Congress would suffice as members of the board.

In place of the government officials, the board should add representatives from the museums and research institutes that are part of the Smithsonian, thereby facilitating communication between the central body and its affiliates. The head of the Government Accountability Office, Congress's investigative arm, could be a productive regent as well.

The current government representatives seem to enjoy the perks of serving on the Smithsonian board, but they should think more broadly about what is in the best interest of the institution. They should be open to a board that has either less or no representation from government.

While a resolute inspector general appointed by Congress would be an important guarantor of institutional good behavior, a separate ombudsman, also appointed by Congress, could bring the complaints and criticism of Smithsonian visitors and institutional beneficiaries to the attention of both staff members and trustees.

At the very least, the presence of lawmakers on the board of the Smithsonian should help the institution garner generous support in the federal appropriations process. But federal aid falls far short of the needs.

In September, the Government Accountability Office released an update of its 2005 report on the state of the Smithsonian's facilities.

It outlined some of the most serious problems facing the institution: deteriorating buildings that have damaged or threatened the condition of artifacts in the museums; cuts

in security staff that have caused increased vandalism; leakages in pools at the National Zoo; leaks in roofs and pipes; inadequate heating, cooling, and electrical systems; and maintenance levels that have not met the growing needs of the institution.

Its new study reported that, as of March 30, 2007, the Smithsonian estimated that it needs at least \$2.5-billion for construction, revitalization, and maintenance projects planned through 2013.

In hearings before the Senate's Committee on Rules and Administration, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, Democrat of California, suggested to the regents that the Smithsonian should raise private money to meet those facilities' costs. She did not indicate any support for substantial additional federal contributions.

However, Ms. Feinstein, who chairs the committee, did manage to sponsor \$174.2-million in earmarks for 111 projects and programs in her home state, according to Citizens Against Government Waste, a Washington watchdog group. Altogether Congress allocated some \$18.2-billion in earmarks, many for trivial and unnecessary expenditures, while a national treasure like the Smithsonian is starved for money.

The appeal for corporate and private money to rescue the Smithsonian from decadence rings hollow. Wealthy donors will not give money toward building improvements, security guards, and heightened maintenance costs. The only feasible financier of the Smithsonian's repair bill is the federal government.

At a time when government agencies are failing, the Smithsonian is one institution that still stands tall — notwithstanding its most recent scandal at the top — beloved by millions of visitors, admired overseas as an outstanding American icon, and remaining an essential foundation of our national culture and artistic achievement.

It deserves America's wholehearted and full support. Instead of remaining silent on the issue, members of Congress should be working hard to ensure full federal financing of the Smithsonian's facilities projects and a larger share of its annual operating budget. If they don't, they should be ashamed of themselves for failing to ensure the health of one of this country's greatest institutions.

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