

Committee on Resources, Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, & Public Lands

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U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6207 - - (202) 226-7736

Witness Statement

Statement of Congressman Jim Matheson

June 7, 2001

Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands

Chairman Hefley, Ranking Member Christensen, I want to thank you for having this hearing today. It is important, not only to the people of Utah, but also to our shared national heritage.

I want to give special thanks to Chairman Hansen and Congressman Cannon and their staffs for their steadfast support of this project, and today's hearing is a culmination of our collective efforts as a delegation.

In 1824, a philanthropist named James Smithson bequeathed his fortune to the government of the United States in order to found an Institution to, and I quote, "increase the diffusion of knowledge among men.

In 1846 the United States established the Smithsonian Institution, and established the wise and remarkable precedent of the value of public investment into institutions of science, research, and heritage.

President Machen and I have come here today as part of this precedent.

Mr. Chairman, in Utah we have an institution that houses one billion years of the history of life on our planet.

It is an institution that holds three-quarters of a million artifacts detailing tens of thousands of years of Native American life throughout the Rocky Mountain and Great Basin areas of our nation.

It contains over 30,000 specimens of mammals, one of the thirty largest collections in the western hemisphere, and its 18,000 specimen reptile collection contains one of the largest turtle assemblages in the world.

It is an institution that houses one of the world's great paleontology collections. It's 12,000 specimen vertebrate fossil collection is dominated by 150 million year old dinosaurs from the Jurassic period, as well as Ice Age mammals such as giant bears, mammoths and mastodons.

What I have just described is just a fraction of the resources provided by the University of Utah's Natural History museum. It is a source of archeological, anthropological, and paleontology treasures unsurpassed in the Western United States.

However, these resources are under threat. First, they are housed in a converted library built during the 1930s. It is a building constructed for the close, claustrophobic stacking of books not for the storage of national treasures.

Most of the ceilings throughout the building are seven feet two inches high. Which, as you can imagine, makes dinosaur storage somewhat of a problem.

Climate control and water systems are woefully antiquated. The humidity and temperature in the display and

storage areas has wide swings. This inconsistency puts tremendous strain on the increasingly fragile collections.

A few weeks ago, I took a tour of the museum. Halfway through the tour a chunk of ceiling fell and crashed at my feet. Never have I been so serendipitously hit in the head by a chunk of plaster.

As with many Depression Era buildings there are numerous structural deficiencies that put the collections at risk and inhibit access to the public. Fire protection systems are inadequate and antiquated, an outdated HVAC system, no possibility for expansion, and no freight elevator or loading dock.

All of these are compounded by the fact that the collection now sits 400 yards away from the second most active fault in the continental United States in a building with beams built to hold books rather than mastodons.

It's plausible to think that our kid's Pokemon cards might be at less risk for damage than some of the pieces in this collection.

The University along with private donors and the state government have embarked on an ambitious project to build a new museum that would be a centerpiece for cultural and scientific education in the Intermountain West.

They have selected a site for the new building that will be located in the University's Research Park, and will be adjacent to the City's zoo, a living history heritage park, and the state arboretum. The University has just completed its pre-program study of the site, as well as determining the project costs.

This project will be a partnership in every sense of the word. State and private donors have promised to match every federal dollar with three of their own. The University's donors and alumni network view this as a priority project for Utah, and are actively engaged in its development.

The University has already contributed the 14 acres for the development. The State has guaranteed the operating funds for the facility at \$800,000 annually. To date close to \$12 million has been raised from private donors, this includes \$10 million from the Emma Eccles Jones foundation.

Unlike many museums throughout the country, about seventy-five percent of the museum's holdings are owned outright by the Federal government. With more than ninety percent of some collections coming from Federal lands.

That means that these artifacts, fossils, and specimens belong to the people of the United States. These exhibits and collections are part of our collective national heritage. I hope with your help, we can save these treasures for future generations of Americans.

Thank you for your time.

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