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Historic Institution Focused on the Future

By Congresswoman Doris O. Matsui, California's 5th Congressional District

In less than a year, the Smithsonian Institution has undergone one of the most striking transformations in its 161-year history. Since March, two short months after Speaker Nancy Pelosi appointed me to the Board of Regents, the Board has embarked on an ambitious and comprehensive reform of its oversight. We have cultivated a plan to create a top-to-bottom culture of accountability.

That is why it was so disappointing to read the recent *Washington Post* Op-Ed by Pablo Eisenberg that asserted that the Smithsonian has not "moved decisively to implement the necessary changes." (Same Old Smithsonian, 1/14.)

I believe a more in-depth look at what the Board has accomplished and our future plans will quell critics' concerns. First and foremost, the Smithsonian has publicly acknowledged its failures. We moved quickly and decisively to begin to fix its problems, open its inner dealings to greater public scrutiny and install new management—a dramatic transformation, particularly for an institution of this size.

The Regents have been working with Acting Secretary Cristián Samper to reform the Smithsonian. We are adhering to federal travel and expense procedures, and the Institution is now conducting a review of the travel expenses of all museum directors and senior staff. To avoid even the appearance of a conflict of interest, we now prohibit senior executives from serving on corporate boards. Five of the top six senior executive positions are now occupied by new people. This Spring, the Board of Regents will name a permanent Secretary of the Smithsonian who will build on these changes and lead a rejuvenated Institution.

Last summer, both the Independent Review Committee (IRC) and our own Governance Committee identified weak oversight and management policies. In response, the Board committed itself to vigorously implementing the recommendations of both groups and to further review of the Institution.

We created a new position, separate from the role of chancellor, for a chair of the Board of Regents. We established an independent staff office that reports solely to the Regents. The critical *gatekeepers* of the Smithsonian—the general counsel, the chief financial officer and the inspector general—have direct access to the Board. Regents participated in eight Board meetings last year, plus many more in connection with the Board's seven standing committees whose members include both Regents and dedicated outside experts. These outside experts have also allowed the Regents to hear from many voices regarding critical issues.

During the past ten months, we have lived by Justice Brandeis' maxim that "sunlight is the best disinfectant." The minutes of our meetings are on our Web site for all to see. While there, interested parties can review various reports, policies, bylaws, biographies, financial statements, and detailed scorecards of our progress on governance reform. All help explain how the Smithsonian works and underscore our commitment to transparency.

The Smithsonian has come a long way, but the reforms are not done. The Board of Regents is committed to confronting and resolving all of the issues identified by the IRC and the Governance Committee. This month, the Board will be reviewing a new code of ethics, as well as addressing controversial issues such as the size, composition and structure of the board itself.

During this challenging period, one thing has remained unchanged. In spite of the turmoil at the top, more than 6,000 dedicated Smithsonian employees and more than 6,000 loyal volunteers have continued their work to make the 19 museums and nine research centers of the Smithsonian places that continue to educate and inspire.

More than 24 million people from across the nation and around the world came to the Smithsonian last year, and we opened 35 extraordinary exhibitions. In addition, through our Traveling Exhibition Service, we reached 5 million more people in towns across the country. The spectacular Robert and Arlene Kogod Courtyard opened at the Smithsonian's National

Portrait Gallery and Smithsonian American Art Museum. This year, we will open Ocean Hall at the National Museum of Natural History, and a transformed National Museum of American History will reopen with a new home for the Star-Spangled Banner.

We rightfully live in an era of high expectations and increased scrutiny of our nation's great public and private institutions. By adopting the Regents' Governance Committee's recommendations, the Smithsonian accepted guiding principles that include operating as a public trust, following only the highest ethical standards, and conducting business with an increased ethos of transparency. The Board of Regents and the Smithsonian staff are committed towards implementing these principles in all areas of the Institution.

Mr. Eisenberg did highlight something that we all know and agree on, "The Smithsonian is loved by the millions of Americans who visit its facilities free of charge and is admired overseas as one of the great American icons. It deserves this nation's whole-hearted support."

I can say with conviction that every day, the Smithsonian is working to be more worthy of that support. 802 words

Congresswoman Matsui sits on the Smithsonian Board of Regents and on the Smithsonian Governance Committee.□