

**Institute of Museum and Library Services Testimony Given 3/14/08 by  
Phil Kohlmetz, Executive Director of the Western Railway Museum and  
Board Member of the California Association of Museums**

Good evening Director Radice and members of the National Museum and Library Service Board. My name is Phil Kohlmetz and I am the Executive Director of the Western Railway Museum, located in Solano County, approximately half way between the San Francisco Bay Area and Sacramento. I am also on the Board of the California Association of Museums, and serve as the Chair of our Legislative Committee. I have spent my entire professional career working to strengthen the public benefit sector. I have extensive finance, marketing, and fundraising experience and have studied many revenue generation models. For three years I was on the review panel of a mid-sized city's funding program for arts and culture, and I have successfully secured contributed revenue from corporations, foundations, individuals, and government agencies at the federal, state, and local levels.

In short, I've seen a lot from the trenches, and have had the opportunity to fly over the landscape at 40,000 feet.

I am here tonight to advocate for the creation of a new Federal Formula Grant program for museums.

In a federal formula grant program for museums, Congress would appropriate money for museums to the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), for distribution to the states. The distribution would be based on a formula, whereby each state gets a base amount, plus an additional allocation based on population. Each state would designate an agency to receive the funds, and only states that matched the federal dollars could participate. States would run the actual granting program, determining the application process and performing the administration.

In 1956, Congress wisely invested in America's libraries by creating a federal formula grant program. By providing federal funding and leveraging state and local funding, this program has built a strong and sustainable system of support for American libraries. Over time, this investment has enhanced professionalism, built programming, and helped our libraries keep up with technological change. Although there are other federal formula programs for the arts, humanities, and historic preservation, no federal formula funding program currently exists for museums.

With the reauthorization of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) in 2009, Congress has the opportunity to positively shape the future of the nation's museums by establishing a federal formula grant program for museums. A Congressional commitment to establishing a federal formula grant system for museums will be a vital step in recognizing and supporting the essential role museums fulfill within the cultural and educational fabric of our nation.

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It is clear to all of us that there is a need for more public funding. However, these hearings are not about the *need* for public funding, but about trying to determine the most efficient and effective use of the funding that is available.

A Federal Formula Grant program is Efficient because:

1. Such a model already exists for health care, education, the arts and humanities, historic preservation, and for libraries.
2. Most of the administration will take place at the state and not the federal level.
3. Federal investment will be matched on at least a 1:1 basis by state investment. States have the option of requiring that their investment be matched by local funds. In this case, federal investment is matched on a 2:1 basis.
4. It will be based on a formula and not subject to political tinkering.

A Federal Formula Grant program is Effective because:

1. Each state will be able to decide how best to use the funds. The needs in Connecticut may be different than in California, Iowa, or Idaho. Grants may be divided between different types of institutions, different sizes, geographic diversity, professional development, operations, capital, etc, but each state would decide what its highest needs are, making the program more responsive “on the ground.”
2. Each state will participate at some level.
3. It will be a new, sorely needed source of support for the stewards of America’s culture.

In 2007, The California Association of Museums (CAM) convened two advocacy summits to “take the temperature” of the California museum field, candidly discussing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, areas for deeper and more fruitful collaboration, and priorities for the next 1 – 5 years.

As one might imagine, funding for operations as well as for capitol projects was a primary need identified in both summits. What is more surprising is that participants overwhelmingly recognized the creation of a federal formula grant program for museums as an equitable and efficient method to address this need. Put simply, California museums of all shapes and sizes *overwhelmingly* support the creation of a Federal Formula Grant program for museums, on par with that of libraries.

Service organizations representing museums at the state, regional, and national level have joined forces to seek reauthorizing legislation for IMLS in 2009 that includes federal formula grants for museums. The Federal Formula Grant Coalition is a strong national network that will work tirelessly on behalf of America’s museums.

CAM has joined the Federal Formula Grant Coalition to advocate for the creation of a Federal Formula Grant program for museums. The coalition is made up of more than 40 local, state,

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regional, and national associations. It represents the diversity of the museum field in that there are large and small groups, ranging from general museum associations like CAM to technical groups like the Association of Railway Museums, history groups like the Association for State and Local History, those in the fine arts (American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works), botanical groups (American Public Gardens Association), children's museums (Association of Children's Museums), and ethnic groups (Association of African American Museums and Council of American Jewish Museums). Even librarians and archivists in the Council of State Archivists have joined the coalition! Associations in half of the 50 states are involved.

Every county has a library and every county has a museum. There is a need for both. Both are centers of lifelong learning. However, unlike libraries, museums are uniquely charged with the *permanent* preservation of their unique and irreplaceable collections. They are also charged with *interpreting* the objects in their collection for the public. These two distinctions alone would seem to suggest that museums are deserving of funding at a similar level, and using a similar program, as libraries.

The human and financial resources necessary to accomplish these tri-partite goals of collecting, preserving, and teaching is significant, and as the Heritage Health Index indicates, America's heritage is in grave danger.

It would be a valid question to ask why I, the director of a small, niche museum, am advocating for a new federal program? The reason is best told through a story. My museum was founded over 60 years ago, and in that time, we have received one and only one government grant. Why is that? My museum suffers from unfortunate geography and a niche subject. We are located in rural Solano County, which is neither part of the Bay Area nor greater Sacramento. We fall outside the geographic priorities of both of these major metropolitan areas for foundation or corporate support. In addition, we are located on rural county land and not in any of Solano County's seven cities. Quite simply we fall in a gap in Solano, which is itself in a gap between San Francisco and Sacramento. We are no one's priority. Yet we are the most visited museum in our region, a major regional tourist draw, and dramatically improve the quality of life for local residents.

My museum has never received federal financial support. The single government grant we received was at the state level. We would have a much higher chance of success in competing with our statewide peers in a government grant program, than competing with our national peers in the current IMLS structure.

In this way, we are quite typical of many sites (and states) around the country. We are quite literally preserving the culture of the communities that make up the fabric of America, that are

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the *heart* of America, and are doing so without any coordinate state or national network of technical or financial support.

In California, we have numerous agencies that support some portion of the museum field, but none that support the field as a whole. The California Arts Council supports art museums and arts education programs, but has little in the way of support to offer my history and technology based institution. The California Cultural and Historical Endowment supported capital projects dealing with 20<sup>th</sup> Century California history, but had little in the way of support to offer those that deal with ancient history or living collections. CAM has been working for years to develop a new state license plate that will support all California museums, and for legal reasons, needed to partner with a state agency to accomplish the project. We discussed the program with both the California Arts Council and California Cultural and Historical Endowment, both natural allies of museums, but neither could partner with us, because neither comprehensively supports the California museum field.

So, what is the most efficient and effective way for Congress to meet the professional development, human resource, and financial needs of America's museums?

Based on my experience in the field, coupled with research performed by the American Association of Museums, the California Association of Museums, the Urban Institute, and the Heritage Health Index, I know the solution.

The efficient and effective way for Congress to support the 865 million annual museum visitors that use museums as centers for life-long learning, and to create a nationwide network of support, is to create a federal formula grant program for museums as part of the 2009 reauthorization of IMLS.

There already exists a strong network of state museum associations, 75% of which are regularly engaged in legislative affairs. However, only 40% report that they have a state agency that administers grants specifically for museums. 100% of those existing state grant programs are competitive, and 75% include peer-review. What this tells us is that several strong and effective models already exist that could be used for all states to develop systems for supporting museums. The catalyst for this change is a federal formula grant program for museums.

Thank you for taking the time and effort to better understand the needs of the field. I deeply appreciate the opportunity to speak before you today and hope that my testimony is useful in developing long-term, effective, and efficient programs to better serve the museum field and the American public.