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Smithsonian Gifts With Strings Alarm Some Scholars

Secretary's Dealings With Big Donors Questioned by Staff

By Jacqueline Trescott
 Washington Post Staff Writer
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A group of scholars at the National Museum of American History has accused Smithsonian Secretary Lawrence M. Small of establishing questionable relationships with private donors and eroding the public trust.

In a letter sent to the Smithsonian Board of Regents, the governing board of the museum complex, the scholars attacked recent agreements with donors that spelled out specific areas and topics their multi-million-dollar gifts would finance. The scholars said the agreements ignored the usual practice of "professional review and scrutiny."

Small's decisions, the letter said, "circumvent established decision-making procedures and seem certain to commit our museum to unethical relationships with private donors."

In a reply to the letter, Spencer Crew, the museum's director, emphasized that one rule had been established. "As a public institution, we will always be open to ideas from all quarters, but that does not translate into our giving up our control."

The pattern set by these agreements, the scholars asserted, "will cause irreversible and deserved loss of public confidence in the Smithsonian Institution, as well as undermine our ability to fulfill our mission in maintaining stewardship of the national collections and in interpreting the diversity of America's past."

The letter opens up an unusual public rift between Small and a second contingent of his staff. Last month, in an attempt to reduce the budget and reorganize science at the Smithsonian, Small announced that he was closing the Conservation and Research Center, a part of the National Zoo. That facility in Front Royal, Va., conducts internationally regarded work with endangered species. Small's proposal was met with condemnation scientists from around the world, including a number at the Smithsonian, and members of Congress. He abruptly scrapped the plan earlier this month.

American History, opened in 1964, has often been the flash point for public debate about how history is presented. Some on the museum's staff suggest that donors' projects have been imposed on the museum since Small took over. American History has received \$40 million from the family of inventor Jerome Lemelson for an inventors' center; \$80 million from businessman

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Kenneth E. Behring for modernizing the building and for some exhibitions at the Behring Center, now a prominent part of the museum name; and \$38 million from local businesswoman Catherine B. Reynolds for a hall of achievement.

It is Reynolds's project that particularly incensed some of the staff. The Smithsonian has set up a blue-ribbon panel to work on the idea, but in her contract Reynolds said those considered for inclusion in the hall should come from winners of the Nobel Prize, Pulitzer Prize, Congressional Medal of Honor or other national citations. When she announced her gift, Reynolds proposed icons, such as Jonas Salk and Martin Luther King Jr., as well as unconventional choices: ABC news commentator Sam Donaldson and Olympic skating champion Dorothy Hamill. Officials at the Smithsonian say they will have the final say. Yet one historian called the whole concept "ahistorical."

The letter to the regents also raised issues of intellectual control and impropriety on the part of Small. It said, "Newly adopted projects, such as the creation of a hall of fame of individual Americans, renaming the museum, and the reconfiguring of exhibition space in the museum, have not been subject to the deliberative procedures applied to all proposals, independent of the source of the ideas or the source of the financial support for the project."

It continued: "The secretary's actions create the appearance of impropriety: Will the Smithsonian Institution actually allow private funders to rent space in a public museum for the expression of private interests and personal views?"

Sheila Burke, undersecretary for American museums and national programs, said the complaints were unfounded. She said public trust had not been compromised, that the creative thrust remains with the Smithsonian and that the secretary was acting within his powers.

"To suggest that we have brokered the trust of the American people flies in the face of fact," said Burke. The agreements, which are reviewed by the Smithsonian legal team, explicitly state the regents and museum administration retain "the ultimate control," she said. (Small was out of town and could not be reached through his office.)

Interviews with members of the staff indicate that frustration has been growing over a lack of involvement from the scholarly staff. "We are concerned that private projects are coming to the floor of a public museum," said Helena Wright, curator of graphics arts and a spokeswoman for the letter writers.

Burke said that ideas generated by both the staff and donors "have a role."

A review of the agreements shows the Smithsonian has given Behring and Reynolds unusual ongoing relationships with the museum. Both are serving as advisers to projects, which is not without precedent in the world of philanthropy. Paul Mellon, the billionaire art collector, and Walter Annenberg, the billionaire publisher, rarely became simple onlookers at the institutions they endowed. All over the country, museums are developing guidelines on these kinds of partnerships.

But at the Smithsonian, which has aggressively courted individual and

corporate partnerships in recent years, relationships with private donors are still a new game.

The federal government provides 70 percent of the Smithsonian's overall budget, and the pending appropriation request would give the complex \$494 million in public money. Yet, even with the \$40 million increase that represents, money is tight. Small recently ordered the elimination of nearly 200 jobs and the closure of several professional units and internal services. At American History, administrators have to cut the fiscal 2002 budget by \$1.2 million and eliminate 20 full-time slots, probably by attrition.

Behring is the Smithsonian's largest single donor in its 155-year history, giving \$20 million to the National Museum of Natural History in 1998 and \$80 million to American History last year. In the latest gift agreement with him, the American History building will incorporate his name into the official title and even gives Behring the right of first refusal to finance any additions to the museum.

"The Museum values Mr. Behring's expertise and insight regarding the final redesign of the Museum's exhibits in a manner that vividly presents the American experience," says the agreement. The contract stresses that all work at American History is in the planning stages but does allow that "further development will take place in close cooperation with Mr. Behring."

Critics of donor involvement are wary of Behring's power and point out that he has already brought in his own architect, the Dahlin Group, for a study of the central spaces. Burke said the Smithsonian had given Dahlin a four-month contract for a series of drawings but that the contract for final work would be open to a competitive bid.

In the agreement with Catherine Reynolds, she is giving \$38 million for an interactive exhibition on the lives of famous Americans; the aim of both the museum and Reynolds, according to the agreement, is to recognize "the power of the individual to shape American life and impact the course of history." Her gift includes an annual contribution, for 40 years, to an endowment that will pay for updating of materials and technology.

Burke said the decision about who will be represented in the exhibit will be made by a blue-ribbon panel and reviewed by the museum's regents. Reynolds can appoint 10 people to the 15-member panel, according to her contract.

Reynolds was also given some supervisory powers. "Before construction of the exhibition commences, the donor and the Smithsonian Institution shall mutually agree upon the final location, the design of the exhibition and a construction schedule," according to the agreement. The contract spells out that Reynolds will be acknowledged in the museum through the display of her name, the logo of her foundation and mention of the American Academy of Achievement, a project of the foundation run by her husband.

In a recent interview, American History Director Crew said there was nothing wrong with Reynolds's idea for a hall of achievers. "It seems to me to make that a part of what we do is not a bad thing. For me, if it is a good idea and has merit we will work with it," he said, noting that the concept follows elements that were introduced in recent well-researched shows, such as one on 19th-century communities. "We all believe we need to be able to tell those

stories," he said. "It was all about how different people found a place for themselves in this country. This is a step in the same direction. I would not see it as something foreign."

But Wright said that ground rules for the development of exhibitions were recently reissued by an internal committee. The process starts with the staff or a scholarly collaborator and then goes to the development office, which then seeks out the underwriting. "We have not had intrusion on the part of the donors," said Wright.

The scholars are asking the regents to review the recent agreements. "We make this request in consideration of the long experience and professional training of museum staff, the advice of the wider historical and museum community, and the best interests of the American public," the letter said.

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