



Why we should support the National Museum of the American Latino

By Eduardo Díaz, director Smithsonian Latino Center
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It is anticipated that, shortly, legislation will be introduced in Congress to establish the National Museum of the American Latino, an estimated \$600 million facility proposed for Smithsonian operation on the National Mall. There appears to be widespread support among Latino cultural and political leadership but the challenges are daunting. Dire economic woes persist, unaided by seemingly intractable political gridlock, which may determine that this kind of discretionary spending request is untenable. Philanthropic and corporate contributions remain static at best. Members of the working class, which comprise the majority of our community, struggle with the basics of daily life, making support of cultural institutions, no matter their importance or value, much less of a priority.



There are also developments outside the Beltway that are troubling and, perhaps, point to something more endemic with respect to Latino cultural facilities. An October 5 article in the [LA Times](#) cited struggles with the recently opened La Plaza de Cultura y Artes located on historic Olvera Street in downtown Los Angeles, which is also a Smithsonian affiliate. This is a county-owned, \$27 million cultural facility, which has experienced problems with administration and fundraising in the private sector. The picture is also gloomy at other flagship Latino centers around the country.

However, against this mixed backdrop, there are optimistic indications that point to healthy levels of cultural participation by Latino communities. This is bolstered by new studies that are examining the demographic and psychographic characteristics that drive their educational and recreational activity. There are other encouraging indications as well—50.5 million Latinos in this country with purchasing power now pegged at close to \$1 trillion dollars annually. There are also prominent Latino museums and cultural centers that, for 25 years or more, have been successfully managed and are meeting the cultural needs of their communities. They include the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, El Museo del Barrio in New York City, and the Mexic-Arte Museum in Austin to name a few. Each is grounded in a mission of community service and has been blessed with dynamic and solid leadership.

It is against this backdrop that a Smithsonian working group has been formed to look at collections, programs, educational outreach and audience development impacting Latinos. A cultural facility highlighting our many contributions to this country's history, cultural and scientific achievement is a laudable goal—our community is significant and has given so much. Notwithstanding Congressional uncertainties, it is clear that we can ill afford to make the kind of mistakes that now plague key Latino cultural institutions in this country. Going forward, a clear mission, dynamic leadership, a realistic resource development and marketing plan, backed by robust philanthropic and corporate support, and buttressing bi-partisan approvals will be keys to success. We have to keep our eyes on the prize—full cultural citizenship for our diverse communities and unconditional service to same—if we are to have reasonable chances of success.