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Senate Approves Grassley Amendment on Smithsonian Accountability

WASHINGTON – Sen. Chuck Grassley, ranking member of the Committee on Finance and a senior member of the Budget Committee, today won unanimous Senate approval of his budgetary amendment freezing a \$17 million increase for the Smithsonian Institution until the Smithsonian makes a series of ethics and accountability reforms in the secretary’s office.

“This amendment sends an immediate message,” Grassley said. “It signals to the Smithsonian that a champagne lifestyle at taxpayer expense is unacceptable. It tells the secretary and his wife to think twice about planning their next first-class vacation underwritten by the taxpayers and Smithsonian donors.”

The full Senate approved Grassley’s amendment to the Fiscal Year 2008 budget resolution on a voice vote. Grassley’s amendment allows the Budget Committee chairman to release up to \$17 million for the Smithsonian after the institution meets several criteria:

- does not compensate any employee more than the total annual compensation of the President of the United States;
- does not provide deferred compensation for any employee greater than any deferred compensation offered to the President;
- ensures that all Smithsonian travel expenditures conform with federal government guidelines and limitations applicable to the Smithsonian; and
- subjects all Smithsonian employees to ethics rules similar to those widely applicable to all federal employees.

According to Grassley’s amendment, the comptroller general of the United States, who runs the Government Accountability Office, must certify satisfactory adoption of the criteria with a submission to Congress. The certification should take into account:

- the Smithsonian’s status as a premier educational, historical, artistic, research, and cultural organization for the American people;
- the Smithsonian inspector general’s recent report regarding unauthorized and excessive authorized compensation, benefits, and expenditures by the Smithsonian secretary;

- that the inspector general’s findings indicate that the secretary’s actions are not in keeping with the public trust afforded to the secretary’s office;
- that priority should be given to repairs to maintain and repair Smithsonian buildings and infrastructure and protect America’s treasures; and
- that priority should be given to full funding for the Smithsonian’s inspector general to build renewed confidence in the American people and Congress that tax-preferred donations and federal funds at the Smithsonian are being spent appropriately and in keeping with the best practices of the charitable sector.

Grassley’s amendment comes after The Washington Post and his own review of the Smithsonian secretary’s actions yielded several findings of what Grassley calls a “champagne lifestyle”:

- The secretary’s spending of \$160,000 on the redecoration of his offices in the institution's main building on the national Mall.
- His receipt of \$1.15 million in housing allowances over a six-year period in return for agreeing to use his home for Smithsonian functions.
- Billing the Smithsonian for household expenses including \$152,000 in utility bills, \$273,000 in housekeeping services and \$203,000 in maintenance charges, including \$2,535 to clean a chandelier.
- Billing \$12,000 for upkeep and service on his backyard swimming pool, including \$4,000 to replace the lap pool’s natural gas heater and pump. Meanwhile, records provided to date by the Smithsonian show he used it only twice for official functions.
- He and his wife’s spending \$4,852.20 each for two first-class round-trip tickets to visit Hawaii in 2003. The couple, also courtesy of the Smithsonian, stayed at the deluxe Four Seasons Resort, at a cost of \$724 per night, for several days over Thanksgiving after a two-day visit to the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory, documents show.
- He and his wife’s spending \$3,464.50 for each of two first-class tickets for a 2002 trip to Las Vegas. There, they stayed in a \$500-per-night room at the Venetian hotel, for a total cost of \$9,692 to the Smithsonian, according to documents.

Grassley he hopes his amendment will win final approval in the Senate-House budget process. He said he would welcome hearings in the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, which has authorizing jurisdiction over the Smithsonian, or in the Appropriations Committee.

“We hear a lot from Democratic leaders on how the elections brought real change,” Grassley said. “I’m looking forward to ethics reform at the national museum a few blocks from the Capitol. It would be a public service to restore trust in the institution that holds America’s treasures.”