Dear Governor Rauner,

On behalf of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists, we strongly urge you NOT to close the Illinois State Museum System. The closure of such a renowned system would be a dramatic loss to science, education, and tourism for the state of Illinois.

Closure of the ISM will have reverberating costs to society. The museum system hosts more than 40,000 school children every year, opening their eyes to possibilities for their future and appreciation of their state’s past. The museum collections contain artifacts and specimens that provide school age children with a glimpse into the fascinating prehistory of the region and have provided promising and established scientists with exquisite collections for analysis. For 138 years the museum has been the careful steward of the natural history of our nation – because of the foresight of earlier legislatures, the state system now houses extensive and important paleontology and anthropology collections. The Mazon Creek collection is a world renowned paleontological collection that provides a rare example of the preservation of not just the skeleton but also the soft tissues. The richness and completeness of the animals interred at this 300 million year old site make it one of just a few such sites WORLDWIDE. Its importance rivals UNESCO World Heritage sites such as Messel in Germany and the Burgess Shale in Canada – making these collections of critical importance to science and bringing important worldwide recognition to the state. The anthropology collections include iconic pre-contact collections essential to research and cultural understanding. The ISM curates the Cahokia Mound collections, of unparalleled importance in understanding pre-colonial life in North America. Dickson Mounds preserves and educates the public about 12,000 years of Native American culture and practice. And Illinois statute REQUIRES that all excavated burials be accessioned into ISM collections following their initial scientific study. Closing the ISM endangers these collections, science, and education in profound ways.

Beyond the cost to society, the plan to close the museum system will COST Illinois money. The closure is argued to save the state of Illinois $4.8 million a year in operating costs. But the facility generates an estimated $33 million in revenue each year, according to the Illinois Office of Tourism minimum estimates of visitor spending. That is a loss of at least $28.2 million dollars every year if the museum is closed.
Government has a fiduciary responsibility to protect and preserve the remains of the past for future generations. If the State is unwilling to do this, then natural and cultural heritage will be relegated to piece-meal preservation only as it suits the interests and aims of the privileged. In a democracy, we should equally value the histories of everyone. This is the important role that state-sponsored museums serve.

Closing the Illinois State Museum System is a loss all the way round.

Sincerely,

Susan Antón, PhD
President

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