

Oregon sues over threats to library, museum services

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The High Desert Museum in Bend. Submitted photo

Oregon is one of 20 states suing the Trump administration, hoping to stop a plan that threatens services at libraries and museums across the state.

On March 31, President Donald Trump signed an executive order calling for the elimination of any “non-statutory components and functions” from the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services and six other federal agencies.

That order would place nearly all of IMLS’s staff on administrative leave, effectively shutting down its operations.

The lawsuit, filed Friday in U.S. District Court in Rhode Island, seeks a temporary restraining order to halt the executive order while it works its way through the courts.

The suit was first filed by the state of Rhode Island, joined by Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin — and Oregon.

The lawsuit is one of three filed last week by Oregon Attorney General Dan Rayfield against the Trump administration.

“The president does not have the power to ignore the United States Constitution, nor does the president have the ability to ignore federal law,” Rayfield said Friday. “That’s really the crux of the three lawsuits that are being filed today — the Trump administration overstepping their constitutional and federal authority to implement various policy aims.”

In Central Oregon, the High Desert Museum has received \$1.4 million in IMLS funding over the past decade, including a \$238,000 grant in 2024 for a new learning hub and \$217,000 in 2021 for a permanent exhibit highlighting Indigenous art and cultural items. In 2021, the museum was awarded the National Medal for Museum and Library Service, the highest honor IMLS offers.

“What the funding has provided for us is the infrastructure and capacity to do our highest and best work,” said Dana Whitelaw, the museum’s executive director. “And that’s what we’re losing.”

Still, Whitelaw said the museum will continue its work — even if at a slower pace.

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Library services

Oregon State Librarian Wendy Cornelisen said the Trump plan would cripple library services across the state.

“There would be impacts here at the State Library, but also for all of the 1,600 libraries that we have,” she said. “It will cause significant financial harm to the state of Oregon and hamper the state’s efforts to facilitate access to information through providing library services.”

Federal funding for libraries began in the 1950s under President Dwight Eisenhower. Today, the Oregon State Library receives about one-quarter of its budget — approximately \$2.6 million — through the Library Services and Technology Act, which is administered by IMLS. That funding supports a wide range of services, including statewide access to electronic databases, the Oregon School Library Information System, the 24/7 Answerland chat reference service, and the popular Library2Go digital lending program and courier systems that help libraries share books and other materials.

“We’re stretching that dollar,” Cornelisen said. “Libraries don’t have to have 17 copies of the same book on their shelves — patrons can borrow books very easily from neighboring libraries.”

Most public libraries in Oregon operate on shoestring budgets, and rely on state-level support to stretch every dollar.

“(Most libraries) don’t have the budget to bring in a consulting firm from Portland to help them — that would be a very large price tag,” Cornelisen said. “This way they’re able to spend their local dollars on materials, like books and DVDs, and utilize those resources from the State Library.”

Stretch every dollar

With IMLS staff potentially sidelined, Oregon officials say they don’t even know if already-allocated federal funding will reach them.

Cornelisen said that while \$2.6 million might seem like a small line item in the federal budget, it makes a huge difference in communities across Oregon.

“It’s change in the couch for Congress,” she said. “\$2.5 million is an important amount of money, but in the grand scheme of the federal government, that small amount that libraries get is stretched to make a huge impact.”