

**Testimony on HB540  
House Appropriations Committee  
March 21, 2005**

Testimony presented by  
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The Montana Historical Society strongly supports HB540 which provides \$7.5 million toward the purchase of the Capitol Hill Mall property for a new Montana History Center. There are a few points I would like to make in my testimony and leave most of the details to the handouts I have provided for you.

First, let me address need. Our current facility was built in the early 1950s and no longer meets our needs. We are literally bulging at the seams and have 31,000 square feet leased in three separate buildings. Our space needs grow at the rate of almost 1,200 square feet per year. Not only do we have inadequate storage for state records and collections, but exhibit space does not allow us to adequately display enough of our fabulous collection. Parking is almost nonexistent, especially for busses and RVs. It has become difficult in our old building to maintain environmental controls. There are no classrooms available to help us work with the thousands of school children who visit each year. We lack auditorium space as often over 200 people come to programs given in our 68-seat meeting room. We lack quarantine areas to control insects and mold and lack work space to prepare exhibits and conserve artifacts and art.

The Montana History Center proposal is a statewide project, and the proposed new Montana History Center would serve the state as a whole as well as our out-of-state visitors. One of the handouts lists examples of significant donations of the Society's collection from all 56 counties. In a typical year we field over 13,000 information requests from the entire state and reach over 18,000 Montana students with our programs and activities. Last year we worked with 53 communities, had 17 traveling exhibits that toured the state, and we provided technical help to 50 institutions. Beyond statewide significance, many of our collections are of national significance as outlined in one of the handouts. The Society Museum is one of 750 nationally accredited museums out of a total of 16,000 museums nationwide.

The concept and opportunity to convert the Capitol Hill Mall, three blocks north of the State Capitol, to a new Montana History Center started with a phone call we received from the owners late last fall. After reviewing the potential from the aspects of cost efficiency, location, parking, overall square footage, positive impact on tax base, and practicality, the Board of Trustees of the Society felt that this proposal had more potential than any other alternative considered in the last six years. The Montana History Foundation also felt that this project would lend itself to significant fund raising to match state contributions and had potential for operations offset as detailed in the handouts.

Finally, there is economic development impact related to expected increases in tourism. The Cody Museum, with an annual visitation of 230,000, is a great example of what can happen even with an average collection if there are good facilities. Montana is becoming known for having the best historic collection west of the Mississippi, but we are also becoming known for having some of the worst and most outdated facilities.

HB 540, in its current form, would help change that, and I urge your support of this bill and the funds proposed for the new Montana History Center.