

Trump's handpicked board of trustees votes to close Kennedy Center for two years

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President Trump's handpicked board of trustees for The Donald J. Trump and the John F. Kennedy Memorial Center for the Performing Arts ("Trump Kennedy Center") voted unanimously March 16 to approve a two-year closure of the venue commencing July 4. The vote, entirely predictable given that the board consists of Trump appointees who have already done his bidding at every step, ratified a decision the would-be dictator had already announced unilaterally on Truth Social last month.

As Trump himself observed before the vote began, with characteristic contempt for any pretense of institutional process, "It's a little odd that we're having this meeting, because we already announced it. These are minor details, but I think everybody agrees."

The administration is billing the renovation work as comprehensive. Trump has claimed the center is "dilapidated" and "on the verge of collapse," requiring a "complete rebuilding." Internal documents and the administration's own recently released renovation renderings, however, tell a different story.

An internal memo obtained by Oregon Public Broadcasting reveals that the planned work consists largely of replacing seating, installing marble armrests, adding new carpeting, repainting select areas and upgrading HVAC and electrical systems. In other words, a glorified refurbishment, not a structural overhaul. On March 13, Trump released renderings of "the new, highly improved Trump Kennedy Center" on Truth Social, showing a building that was, by all appearances, essentially identical to the existing one.

On the other hand, a lawsuit filed Monday by a group of historic site preservationists against Trump's plan expresses concern that, "as with the White House East Wing, the potential scope of planned changes is understated and will result in irreparable loss,"

according to press remarks made by Carol Quillen of the National Trust for Historic Preservation about the proposal, suggesting the Trump administration is lying about the scope of the changes it is planning.

The project will cost \$257 million, with financing, according to the president in a Truth Social post, already "completed, and fully in place." At the March 16 meeting of the Kennedy Center Board, presided over by Trump, the latter said the project is funded through House appropriations for the Kennedy Center's capital repair and restoration.

The project brings to mind the White House ballroom being built on top of the site of the former East Wing, which has become one of various conduits of graft and corruption for the Trump family and associates, a "physical manifestation of a government of, by, and for the rich," as the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote regarding that project.

The political character of the move is inseparable from the Kennedy Center's precipitous decline under Trump's stewardship. Since Trump fired the center's old board in February 2025, appointed himself chairman and renamed the institution the "Trump Kennedy Center," artists such as Philip Glass, Issa Rae and dozens of other individuals and arts organizations have canceled performances in protest.

Ticket sales have plummeted to their lowest levels since the COVID-19 pandemic. The center has been converted into a platform for far-right cultural programming, and the public has responded accordingly, by largely staying away.

A two-year closure, in this context, is less a renovation than a retreat: an attempt to wait out the damage inflicted by Trump's own cultural vandalism and reopen the institution as a fait accompli under a new brand.

A column in the *Washington Post* titled, “Maine decries the lack of congressional oversight with the renovation process, as well as its extended timetable of two years.”

Architectural critic Philip Kennicott invokes Adam Smith’s 1759 “Theory of Moral Sentiments,” in which Smith observed two competing aesthetics as capitalism forged a new bourgeois worldview against the old feudal orders: one “more gaudy and glittering in its colouring ... forcing itself upon the notice of every wandering eye,” the other “more correct and more exquisitely beautiful in its outline.” Trump’s proposed 90,000-square-foot ballroom replacing the once publicly-accessible East Wing, Kennicott argues, reorients “the White House to suggest that it is fundamentally responsive to economic rather than civic power. ... The executive serves the financial class first and foremost.”

Bound up with Trump’s attempts to close the “Trump Kennedy Center” is the departure of Richard Grenell as center president, also announced last week. Grenell, one of the more reliable Trump toadies in a cabinet and administration not short of them, was appointed interim president in February 2025, shortly after Trump purged the board and seized control of the institution.

Grenell’s career encapsulates the character of the Trump apparatus. He has served variously as US ambassador to Germany, acting director of national intelligence and special presidential envoy for Serbia and Kosovo. Entirely unqualified to manage an arts center, he has made up for it as a tireless promoter of Trump’s personal interests in this particular field, however, without the slightest success.

According to CNN, Trump ultimately soured on Grenell because of the relentless negative headlines the “Trump Kennedy Center” has generated under his watch and because Trump felt his appointee was failing to manage the institution’s public image adequately. Grenell will be replaced by Matt Floca, currently the center’s vice president of facilities operations.

For their part, Democratic lawmakers have once again limited their criticism to floor speeches in Congress and futile lawsuits in federal courts. Representative Chellie Pingree, a Democrat from

Maine decries the lack of congressional oversight with the renovation process, as well as its extended timetable of two years.

Representative Joyce Beatty (Democrat-Ohio), meanwhile, sued Trump and others in December 2025 over the renaming of the center and revised the complaint this year in light of the developments with the announced closure.

U.S. District Judge Christopher Cooper issued an order requiring the board to provide Beatty (an ex officio trustee of the “Trump Kennedy Center”) with relevant documents and a “meaningful opportunity” to speak but did not grant her a vote on the closure or renovation at this stage, doubting her immediate right to one.

Beatty has complained to the press that the renovations are “unlawful” because they require congressional approval, further underscoring not only the Trump administration’s approach to “the law” but also the Democrats’ servility in wagging fingers at Trump while respecting the very legal system he has hijacked to his advantage. Nothing frightens these people more than the possibility of mass resistance to Trump’s assaults on democracy and cultural institutions.

The “Trump Kennedy Center” debacle is part of a broader offensive against culture, history and publicly funded institutions. The Smithsonian Institution faces demands for a sweeping “content review” and threats to withhold federal funding unless it purges exhibits on race, slavery, transgender identity and immigration. Meanwhile, the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities has canceled tens of millions in grants, gutting arts organizations, libraries and academic projects nationwide — part of what Trump has vowed will be the same treatment already applied to universities, from which he has withheld billions to coerce political compliance.



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