

Testimony for the Record
Submitted to the
U.S. Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution
For the Hearing
“Protecting American Citizenship IV: America 250 and Reclaiming American Citizenship”
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Chairman Schmitt, Ranking Member Welch and all members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I think we all can agree that America's 250th birthday should be a moment that brings us together. No matter our political party, where we live, or how we vote, the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States should be an opportunity to reflect on our shared history, celebrate our democratic ideals, and recommit ourselves to the principles that have guided this nation for two and a half centuries.

That is why I appreciate importance of today’s discussion of citizenship in the context of America’s 250th Anniversary. As Americans mark this milestone, the themes of shared civic identity -- what it has meant since our nation’s founding and what it means today -- gives the commemoration its deepest significance.

It was in this spirit that over a decade ago, Congress approved America250, a bipartisan effort to ensure that this commemoration would unite the country, reflect our shared democratic values, and tell a full and honest American story. The idea behind America250 was simple and straightforward – to provide Americans with the opportunity to reflect on the nation's past, honor all Americans' contributions, and to look toward the future.

Unfortunately, what should be a nonpartisan celebration has become a growing scandal involving secrecy, political favoritism, and the diversion of at least \$100 million in taxpayer

funds to a private entity operating without any Congressional oversight. And the American people deserve answers.

A little background on how we got here.

In 2016, Congress established America250 as the official bipartisan entity responsible for commemorating our nation's 250th anniversary. Congress created a structure with safeguards, oversight mechanisms, and clear lines of accountability to ensure that public funds would be spent appropriately and that the celebration would belong to all Americans—not to any political party, administration, or special interest group.

Then last year, through passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA), Congress appropriated \$150 million to the Secretary of the Interior for the observance and commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States.

All that is standard, and in line with past precedent. But what happened next is anything but.

Shortly after Congress appropriated the funds, the Trump Administration created a private entity, Freedom250, shielded behind a limited liability company, to exist outside of oversight and accountability. And public reports indicate that Secretary Burgum directed at least \$100 million of taxpayer dollars¹ into this secretive and partisan new entity.

Since then, reports have raised troubling questions about whether Freedom250 is being used to sell access to the President, conceal the identities of donors, and spend taxpayer dollars on partisan political activities—all while the congressionally authorized non-partisan America250 faces a \$100 million funding shortfall.²

¹ Ben Smith, “*Inside the scramble to keep a divided America’s 250th birthday on track*,” *Semafor* 1/12/26: <https://www.semafor.com/article/01/12/2026/inside-the-scramble-to-keep-a-divided-americas-250th-birthday-on-track>. USASpending.gov shows a \$68 million grant from NPS to Freedom250, exclusive of in-kind NPS contributions through staffing and other resources: https://www.usaspending.gov/award/ASST_NON_P26AC00101_014.

² Anna Kramer, “*America’s Bipartisan Birthday Commission Is Losing to Trump*,” *NOTUS* 6/1/26: <https://www.notus.org/trump-white-house/america-250-shortfall-freedom-250-interior-funds>

Our nation's 250th birthday should not be a partisan project. It should not be a vehicle for political influence. And it certainly should not be shielded from public – or Congressional - scrutiny.

The American people are paying for this celebration. We have every right to know where our money is going, who is benefiting from it, and whether our taxpayer money is being spent legally and in accordance with Congress's mandate.

To maintain a government of the people, for the people, and by the people, we must demand a government that answers *to* the people. Because if we cannot demand transparency and accountability when taxpayer dollars are used to celebrate our democracy, then we risk undermining the very democratic principles this anniversary is supposed to honor.

It was in that spirit, the organization I lead, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), sent a letter³ to Interior Secretary Burgum in January seeking answers to some of the pressing questions about Freedom250.

Specifically, we asked Secretary Burgum:

To disclose why a reported \$100 million in taxpayer funds was diverted from America250 to Freedom250, and how those funds are being used.

At a bare minimum there should be a publicly available budget, clear descriptions of funded activities, identification of contractors or grantees, and an explanation of who has decision-making authority over expenditures.

Second, we asked the Department to clarify whether Freedom250 is raising private funds in addition to receiving taxpayer dollars.

³ Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility letter to Interior Secretary Doug Burgum, 1/15/26: https://peer.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/1_15_26_Freedom250-Letter-to-Burgum.pdf

If so, the sources of those funds, the amounts raised, and the rules governing their use must be publicly disclosed. Any private fundraising should be subject to rigorous reporting and auditing requirements to prevent conflicts of interest or undue political influence over a national civic commemoration, or worse.

Lastly, we asked about the role of the National Park Foundation in relation to Freedom250. And specifically, if National Park Foundation funds, staff time, or other in-kind resources are being used to support Freedom250.

If so, the Secretary should disclose how those contributions are accounted for, whether they were formally approved by the Foundation's board, and how they align with the congressionally chartered Foundation's charitable mission. Staff time and in-kind support represent real costs to the public and must be treated with the same transparency as direct expenditures.

The creation of a parallel private entity to carry out work that purports to be similar to America250 circumvents accountability, weakens congressional intent, and undermines public trust—trust that is essential if the 250th anniversary is to be a moment of shared reflection rather than division.

The Secretary and Department of the Interior have the ability to resolve these questions by releasing a full accounting of the funding, disclosing fundraising activities, clarifying institutional roles, ensuring public employees are not being used to promote a private enterprise and explaining how current actions align with the law.

To date, the Department has failed to do so – and has not responded to our letter.

I have submitted our full letter into the record along with a copy of this testimony.

And since we sent our letter, more troubling information about Freedom250 has come to light.

In February, a report came out that showed Freedom250 is “crafting bespoke packages” for sponsors.⁴ Sponsorship tiers begin at \$500,000, including VIP event access and speaking roles at the national Fourth of July celebration. For \$2.5 million and up, sponsors get a photo opportunity with President Trump at a private Freedom250 reception.

And in January the CEO of Freedom250 traveled to Davos, Switzerland and solicited⁵ foreign donations to Freedom250.

We have already seen events sponsored by corporations with regulatory or other matters before the Administration. For example, Paramount’s mega-merger with Time Warner was approved, against the advice of career lawyers⁶, just a few days before they were the exclusive broadcast partner of the UFC fight on the White House lawn. And they are not alone; numerous other corporations seeking influence with the Administration such as ExxonMobil, Chevron, Lockheed Martin, Palantir and United Health Groups are donating to Freedom250, the private entity.

Sponsorship packages for lawn access to the UFC fight reportedly began at \$1 million.

America's 250th birthday should belong equally to every American. It should not become a pay-to-play operation where wealthy donors receive privileged access and influence unavailable to ordinary citizens.

The truth is that Congress and the American public still do not have anywhere near a complete picture of who is funding Freedom250, what access or perks or political favors they are getting for their funding or how the money is being spent.

⁴ Kenneth P. Vogel, Lisa Friedman and David A. Fahrenthold, “*For \$1 Million, Donors to U.S.A. Birthday Group Offered Access to Trump*,” The New York Times 2/8/26: <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/08/us/politics/freedom-250-trump-donors.html>

⁵ USA House Davos Live Stream on Youtube 1/19/26: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulZDH0Y1d4Q>

⁶ Dave Michaels, Dana Mattioli, Sadie Gurman and Jessica Toonkel, “Justice Department Decision to Allow Paramount Deal Surprised Staff Investigators,” The Wall Street Journal 6/15/26: <https://www.wsj.com/business/media/justice-department-decision-to-allow-paramount-deal-surprised-staff-investigators-a18f70da>

And the fact that what little and limited information we do have is being pieced together from various news outlets – and not from government entities – highlights the lack of transparency at the heart of the problem.

Adding to the concerns about Freedom250, there are also troubling reports that public employees are being used to promote this private organization.

Department of the Interior employees have reportedly been instructed to include Freedom250 logos and links to the organization's website in their official email signatures. That raises significant questions about whether career civil servants are being compelled to promote a private political entity as part of their official duties.

And a recent report said that National Park Service employees are being forced to wear pins with the branding of the private entity - Freedom250 - on their uniforms this summer or face discipline.⁷

Additionally, in an unprecedented move meant to further restrict the ability of Congress and the American public to get the full picture of what is happening with Freedom250, we have heard that many public employees working on events surrounding the 250th birthday must sign non-disclosure⁸

Career civil servants do not work for a political party or a private corporation. They work for the American people and swear to uphold and defend the Constitution. The 250th anniversary of the United States should celebrate the enduring principle that the government derives its legitimacy from the people and serves the public interest, not private interests. At a moment when we should be honoring the independence, integrity, and professionalism of our public institutions, federal employees should not be forced to lend the credibility of their offices to an organization

⁷ Dan Friedman, “Trump Administration Tells Federal Employees to Wear “Freedom” Pins—Or Else,” *MotherJones* 6/18/26: <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2026/06/trump-freedom-250-pins-national-park-service/>

⁸ Eileen Sullivan, “Trump Administration Wants Federal Employees to Sign Nondisclosure Agreements,” *The New York Times* 5/26/26 <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/26/us/politics/trump-administration-nondisclosure-agreements.html>

that operates outside many of the transparency and accountability standards expected of the government.

And finally, beyond the concerns about transparency, donor influence, and public accountability, there is a larger question about whether Freedom250 is honoring the very purpose for which America's 250th anniversary was created.

America's 250th birthday does not belong to any political party or any Administration. It belongs to all Americans. Yet instead of focusing on the shared values and common history that unite us, Freedom250 has repeatedly used our tax dollars to advance political messaging and activities that align with the Trump agenda.

Freedom250 dedicated \$10 million to a fleet of so-called "Freedom Trucks" designed to counter what it describes as the "woke agenda."⁹ Freedom250 Partner Moms for Liberty leveraged the branding for a high-dollar fundraising event on Ellis Island in May.¹⁰ And just this week, President Trump posted on social media that he will be using the national Fourth of July celebration to hold a political rally on the National Mall.

The overt politicization of our nation's birthday is a profound departure from the bipartisan vision Congress established for America250. And is an abuse of our tax dollars. A celebration funded by American taxpayers should strive to represent the entire nation, not serve partisan purposes.

I would also be remised if I did not mention that in addition to the numerous scandals and questions about abuse of taxpayer funds around Freedom250, to prepare for celebrations in Washington DC, the Administration has also divert nearly \$100 million¹¹ in national parks visitor fees for a series of vanity projects throughout Washington DC. Many of which – like the work at the reflecting pool, have gone to allies of the Administration through no-bid contracts at

⁹ Liam Adams and Karissa Waddick "*Trump's Freedom 250 hits the road with museum focused on faith, civics,*" 3/2/26: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2026/03/02/trumps-250-program-us-history-mobile-museum/88710565007/>

¹⁰ <https://www.momsforliberty.org/freedom250/>

¹¹ Anna Kramer, "The Trump Administration Is Spending \$5 Million to Coat Horse Statues in Gold," NOTUS 5/28/26: <https://www.notus.org/trump-white-house/national-park-service-dc-beautification-contracts-horse-statues>

inflated prices. This is happening at a time when our national parks are experiencing record visitation and being stretched beyond the brink with staff and budget cuts.

A 250th anniversary celebration should strengthen trust in our democratic institutions, not erode it. And when it comes to Freedom250, transparency is not a distraction from patriotism. It is one of its most essential expressions.

Our government must answer to the American people and provide a full accounting of how their taxpayer money and federal resources are being spent to fund Freedom250, who is making decisions about where this money is spent, and whether those decisions follow Congressional mandates and the interests of the nation as a whole.

We urge the Department of the Interior and all agencies involved in this effort to provide that transparency, and we urge Congress to exercise vigorous oversight to ensure that America's 250th anniversary remains what it was always intended to be: a celebration of the American people, not a vehicle for private interests, partisan politics, or political influence.

Financial controversy and pay-to-play events layered on top of this celebration diminishes rather than clarifies the purpose of this celebration. It shifts public attention from the substance of what citizenship and shared identity and values mean, to the spectacle of who benefits and who doesn't. The story of America belongs to all of us. Its 250th birthday should as well.

Thank you for holding this hearing and discussing these important issues. I look forward to answering your questions.



January 15, 2026

The Honorable Doug Burgum
Secretary
United States Department of Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington DC 20240

Dear Secretary Burgum,

As we enter the new year and prepare to celebrate the nation's 250th anniversary, we write to raise concerns about the creation and funding of Freedom250 and its relationship to the congressionally authorized America250 celebration.

America's 250th anniversary is a national milestone that belongs to all Americans, regardless of political affiliation, religious viewpoints, or ethnic or racial background. Congress intentionally established America250 as a bipartisan effort to ensure that this commemoration would unite the country, reflect our shared democratic values, and tell a full and honest American story.

As you know Freedom250 was recently established as a Delaware Corporation by the Trump administration and has assumed many of the functions of America 250. We are concerned about [reports](#) that indicate taxpayer dollars earmarked for America 250 are being diverted to Freedom250. This reported transfer raises serious concerns that demand clear public answers. The American people are paying for this commemoration. They deserve to know where their money is going—and what's it's being used for.

First, the Department must disclose how at least \$100 million in taxpayer funds that were diverted away from America250 to Freedom250 are being used. This should include a publicly available budget, clear descriptions of funded activities, identification of contractors or grantees, and an explanation of who has decision-making authority over expenditures at Freedom250.

Second, the Department must clarify whether Freedom250 is raising private funds in addition to receiving taxpayer dollars, including through selling merchandise. If so, the sources of those non-taxpayer funds, the amounts raised, and the rules governing their use must be publicly disclosed. Any private fundraising should be clearly segregated from federal funds and subject to rigorous reporting and auditing requirements to prevent conflicts of interest or undue political influence over a national civic commemoration.

Third, the public deserves clarification regarding the role of the National Park Foundation in relation to Freedom250. Freedom250 is listed as a subsidiary of the National Park Foundation, the official nonprofit partner of the National Park Service. Freedom250 lists its address as that of the National Park Foundation. Washington, DC records indicate that its resident agent is an employee of the National Park Foundation. If National Park Foundation funds, staff time, or other in-kind resources are being used to support Freedom250, the Department should disclose how those contributions are accounted for, whether they were formally approved by the Foundation's board, and how they align with the Foundation's charitable mission. Staff time and in-kind support represent real costs to the public and must be treated with the same transparency as direct expenditures.

Taken together, these concerns point to a broader issue of oversight. The creation of a parallel entity to carry out work similar to America250 is blurring accountability, weakening congressional intent, and undermining public trust. That trust is essential if the 250th anniversary is to be a moment of shared reflection rather than division.

The American people deserve confidence that their money is being used responsibly, lawfully, and in service of an inclusive national commemoration.

The Department of the Interior can resolve these questions quickly if it chooses to. It can release a full accounting of Freedom250's budget, disclose all fundraising activity, clarify the role of the National Park Foundation, and explain—clearly—how all of this aligns with congressional laws and intent regarding America's 250th Anniversary celebration, the use of tax payers dollars, and the mixing of public, private and charitable funds in implementing the President's agenda.

A 250th anniversary celebration should strengthen trust in our democratic institutions, not erode it. Transparency is not a distraction from patriotism. It is one of its most essential expressions.

We look forward to your prompt response and to seeing the Department take concrete steps to restore public trust through openness and accountability.

Sincerely,

Timothy Whitehouse
Executive Director

Cc:

Chairman Lee

Ranking Member Heinrich

Chairman Westerman

Ranking Member Huffman

All members of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee

All member of the House Committee on Natural Resources